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## Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

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### Parents' Ultimate Guide to Snapchat

Is Snapchat safe for kids? How does it work? And what's with Snapstreaks? Everything curious parents need to know about this ultra-popular app.

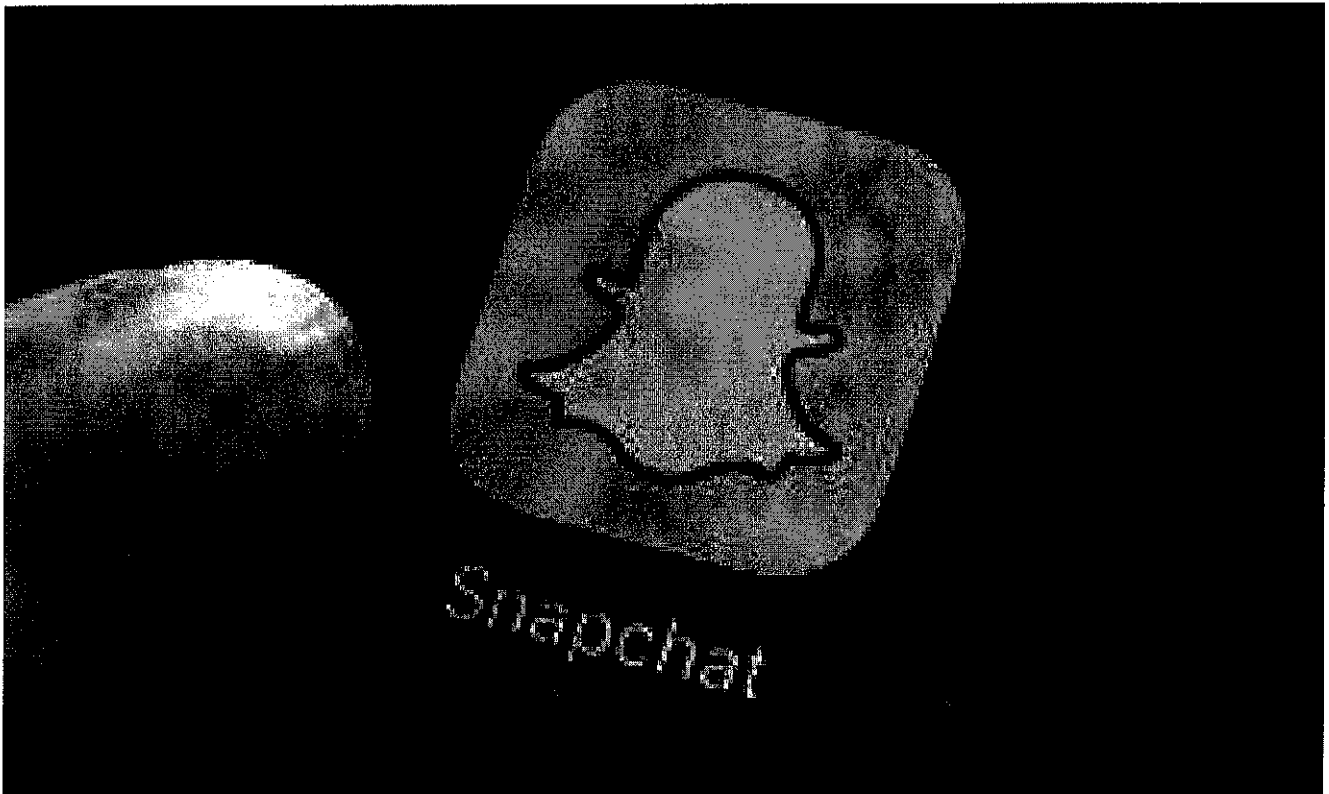
By [Christine Elgersma](#) 6/4/2018

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Topics: [Cellphone Parenting](#), [Social Media](#)

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If you have tweens or teens, you know [about Snapchat](#). And if you can't figure out how it works, you're like many parents. One of the most popular social media apps out there, Snapchat gives kids and teens what they really want: a simple way to share everyday moments while simultaneously making them look awesome. And unlike [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), which record

and broadcast everything you do, Snapchat uses messages that are meant to disappear (learn more about how they actually don't). Like so many social media apps, Snapchat is a mixed bag, so it's a good idea to understand how it works, how your kids use it, and how much time they spend on it so you can make sure their experiences are positive.

In addition to letting you connect with and follow friends, Snapchat offers a lot more cool stuff: games, news and entertainment, quizzes, and truly innovative photo- and video-editing tools (so innovative, in fact, it's nearly impossible for grown-ups to figure them out -- another reason kids love it).

Something about snapping, sharing, and then forgetting about life's little moments has massive appeal for kids. And for the most part, that's what they use Snapchat for. The app has a lighthearted design, and its photo filters and effects tend toward rainbows and flower crowns. But other features pose some risks: Snap Map lets friends see each other's location on a map, which isn't always safe; Snapstreaks requires kids to exchange messages for as long as possible, which is a major time-suck; and Discover offers some age-inappropriate content. With your guidance on privacy, safety, social media pressure, and marketing, though, Snapchat can be a fun way for teens to connect. Check out our full review to get the whole scoop.

**What is Snapchat?**

**How does Snapchat work?**

**How old do you have to be to use Snapchat?**

**Do messages really disappear on Snapchat?**

**What are Snapstreaks?**

**What's Snap Map?**

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**What's a Snapcode?**

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**What are Snapchat's other features?**

**Is Snapchat safe for tweens and teens?**

**How do I monitor Snapchat and use the settings?**

**What is Snapchat?**

Snapchat is a popular messaging app that lets users exchange pictures and videos (called snaps) that are meant to disappear after they're viewed. It's advertised as a "new type of camera" because the essential function is to take a picture or video, add filters, lenses, or other effects and share them with friends.

**How does Snapchat work?**

All you need to sign up is your name, an email address, and your birth date. On Snapchat, users go by a handle, and Snapchatters gravitate toward silly names. To add friends, you can upload your contacts or search for people you know. You can also automatically add someone by taking a picture of their "Snapcode," a special QR code unique to each user. After that, things get a little confusing. On Snapchat, photos -- not text -- usually start the communication. To begin a conversation, you tap the big camera circle and take a snap. There are all sorts of photo-editing tools (you have to experiment to figure out what they do) as well as filters to adorn your images. Once you customize your snap, you can send it to anyone in your friends list or add it to your story, which is a record of the day that your friends can view for 24 hours. In addition to individual texting, Snapchat also offers group texting and group stories that everyone in a group can contribute to. You can delete the text messages you send, though in a group chat the other people will see that you've deleted something. In terms of Snaps, you can delete unopened ones that use a saved picture (not taken on the spot). Snaps that include pictures you just took (and didn't save) aren't possible to delete.

### **How old do you have to be to use Snapchat?**

According to the terms of service, users must be 13. You have to enter your birth date to set up an account, but there's no age verification, so it's easy for kids under 13 to sign up. Common Sense Media rates Snapchat OK for teens 16 and up, mainly because of the exposure to age-inappropriate content and the marketing ploys, such as quizzes, that collect data.

### **Do messages really disappear on Snapchat?**

It depends. If you set a time limit on a snap, it will disappear after it's viewed. However, recipients can take a screenshot of an image using their phones or a third-party screen-capture app. A phone screen-capture will notify the sender that the image was captured. But third-party apps don't trigger a notification. For these reasons, it's best that teens understand that nothing done online is really temporary. Before sending a sexy or embarrassing snap of themselves or someone else, it's important to remember that the picture could circulate the school by tomorrow morning.

### **What are Snapstreaks?**

With a Snapstreaks, two users have snapped back and forth within a 24-hour period for three days in a row. Once you've established a streak, special emojis and statistics display next to the streakers' names to show you how long you've maintained a streak. Why do they matter? For one thing, they add to your overall Snapchat score (basically a number that reflects how much you use the app). For another, they can occasionally become the most important thing in a kid's life. Because of the intense bonds kids can form over social media, they can feel that a Snapstreak is a measure of their friendship, and if they don't keep it up they'll let the other

person down. Teens have even been known to give friends access to their Snapchat accounts to keep a streak going if they can't do it themselves (for example, if their phone gets taken away for being online too much). This can lead to feelings of pressure, anxiety, and compulsion, so it's good to know if your kid has streaks going to get a window into why that selfie might feel really important.

### **What's Snap Map?**

Snap Map displays your location on a map in real time. Only your Snapchat friends can see where you are. If your friends have opted into Snap Map, you can see their locations, too. (You can turn this off or use it in Ghost Mode, which allows you to see the map but not be seen by others.) Snap Map also features news and events from around the world -- for example, a political rally in Nicaragua, which displays as an icon on a map of the world. The biggest risk with Snap Map is a teen having their location seen by all their friends -- since some of their Snapchat contacts may not be real friends. Unless there's a specific event and it makes it easier for friends to know each other's location, it's best to leave Snap Maps off or use it in Ghost Mode.

### **What's a Snapchat story?**

A story is a collection of moments in the form of pictures and videos that, taken together, create a narrative. (After Snapchat popularized the format, other social media services, including Facebook and Instagram, offered story-creation tools, too.) On Snapchat, stories appear as circles, and when you tap them, they autoplay the pictures or videos the user collected. You can create personal stories that your friends can view for a 24-hour period. Or, if you think your Snap is particularly interesting or newsworthy, you can send it to Our Story. Our Stories are kind of like mini-documentaries of events, holidays, game championships, or other things happening in the world on a particular day. Snaps are curated and compiled by the company. While it's cool to have your story added to Our Story, it's also very public, so kids should think carefully before submitting one.

### **What's a Snapcode?**

When you sign up, Snapchat gives you your own unique QR code. When you meet a fellow Snapchat user and want to friend each other, you can just take a snap of the other person's code, and they're automatically added to your friends list. Because it's so easy to find friends on Snapchat (depending on your settings) or exchange codes, teens may end up with virtual strangers on their friends list. For a variety of reasons, that can be risky, so it's best to talk to your teen about when it's safe to add people.

### **What's Discover?**

Discover offers content created by celebrities, news and entertainment outlets, and other

users. You can subscribe to specific Discover sources to receive their feeds. While Discover offers some legitimate news from publishers including the *New York Times* and Vice Media, the offerings can be promotional and are frequently mature. But if your kid has signed up with their correct birth date, they'll miss the alcohol ads and other adult content that Snapchat filters out for underage users. Discover stories often feature promos prompting kids to "swipe up" to learn more (which usually leads to ads) or take a quiz (which is usually a marketing tool). This section runs the gamut from harmless to shocking, so it's good to look around and get a sense of what your kids are seeing.

### What are Snapchat's other features?

Snapchat is waaaay more than cute photos. The more you use the app, the more points you get and the higher your Snapchat score goes. Snapchat awards high scorers with trophies and other perks. Here are a few other Snapchat features:

- **Face lenses and world lenses:** If you've seen photos of people with cartoon cat ears and whiskers on their faces, those are face lenses. World lenses are augmented reality elements, such as rainbows, that you can add to a snap so it looks like it's part of the photo. Technically, lenses are "overlays" -- and they cost money on Snapchat.
- **Geo-filters:** These are location-specific elements that can only be unlocked by visiting a specific place. Businesses use geo-filters as a way for customers to check in and advertise them. A kid could create a special geo-filter for their sweet-16 party for attendees to add to their photos.
- **Snapcash:** Like PayPal or Venmo, Snapcash lets users transfer money to each other.
- **Memories:** If you don't want your snaps to disappear, you can store them to send later. [My Eyes Only](#) is a way to save Memories behind a passcode so that no one else can see them.
- **Snapstore:** This is exactly what it sounds like: a place to buy Snapchat-related items.
- **Shazam:** A feature that helps you identify a song.
- **Snap Games:** Co-play games with voice/text chat and ads, launched from the chat section to play with friends.
- **Snap Originals:** Shows created by Snapchat with a wide range of formats from docuseries to pop culture, made in partnership with platforms like BuzzFeed.

### Is Snapchat safe for tweens and teens?

Most kids use Snapchat to goof around and stay in contact with their friends -- end of story. Yes, there's some mature content, but it's appropriate for most teens 16 and up. That said, there are three key risky areas:

**The myth of disappearing messages.** When Snapchat first started, it was labeled "[the sexting](#)

app" because people sent intimate photos, assuming they'd self-destruct. Any app can be misused, but a lot of kids mistakenly believe that Snapchat has a built-in Get Out of Jail Free card. Teens really need to understand that the content they share can be saved and shared and may never go away. It's best to have this conversation before they download Snapchat, but it's never too late. Talk about whether any of their friends have ever pressured them to send a sexy image and discuss why someone who would do that does not have your best interests at heart. Kids should also ask permission before sharing a picture of someone else.

**The time suck.** Snapchat is a ton of fun to use, and there's lots to discover on it. Snapstreaks and stories add a time-pressure element that makes kids feel like they have to check in. If it ever seems like your kid is stressing and not using the app for fun, it's time to step in.

**Privacy and safety.** Since it's so easy to add friends in Snapchat, you can end up with lots of people you don't know well on your friends list. And depending on your settings, the app can collect a ton of data about your habits in -- and outside of -- the app. Snapchat also works with a lot of third parties that they share your data with.

### **How do I monitor Snapchat and use the settings?**

The biggest challenge for parents is that there's no way to see your kid's activity in the app in the same way as on other social media platforms. Since there's no feed to scroll, there's not much to monitor. Instead, focus on the privacy settings. If you decide to say yes to Snapchat, sit down with your kid and together go into the app's settings (the little gear icon next to your profile image). Scroll down to "Who Can..." This is where you can control important safety features such as who can see your location and who can view your story. This is a perfect time to talk to your kid about using their Snapchat account safely and responsibly. Discuss when and how often you'll check in on how they're using it and how they're feeling about it. Explain that you understand that social media is important to them, and, at the same time, your role is to protect them. Don't forget to ask your teen to show you some of their snaps and some of the cool features they like in the app. That'll make it a little less scary for you -- and send the message that you're on the same team.



### **About Christine Elgersma**

Christine Elgersma wrangles learning and social media app reviews and creates parent talks as Senior Editor, Parent Education. Before coming to Common Sense, she helped cultivate and create ELA curriculum for a K-12 app... [Read more](#)

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## Comments (11)

**Adult** written by [Lorisparrow](#)

April 4, 2019

I work with teens and I have been very disturbed to learn how many teen boys are sending “dic picks” via Snapchat. It is becoming quite popular and a way to harass and shame girls as young as middle school students. I don’t see a lot written about this but I guess it has becoming quite the thing. I don’t think most parents have any clue what their kids are being exposed to.

**Teen, 14 years old** written by [KillianSnow](#)

March 30, 2019

Many of my friends, including myself, have Snapchat. In my opinion, it is the more casual version of texting. Instead of asking for someone's number, you ask for their snap username. I am aware that some people use the app to send inappropriate pictures, but that depends on who your friends are. Other than communicating with peers, Snapchat can also be used to see what your favorite social media stars or YouTubers are up to. Overall, it is a safe and fun app that is mostly used for communication.

**Kid, 11 years old** March 23, 2019

I don't feel as if it is ever used for purposes that some claim. People claim that it is used for sexting, selling drugs, etc. But for me, it's just a way to take cute photos, talk with friends, and video chat. I don't use it to hide messages, I save everything I do on there. Now, this is coming from a 6th-grade girl, but that doesn't change anything. tl;dr - Snapchat isn't (usually/in my case) used for bad things, period.

**Teen, 13 years old** written by [Urwrongimnot](#)

April 16, 2019

You realize that using this app is illegal for you Terms of service says you HAVE to be 13 to agree and use this app

**Teen, 16 years old** written by [pepepepinojorge](#)

May 10, 2019

im gonna report you on roblox bc ur 11 and its illegal oooooooh

**Parent of a 12, 15, and 17 year old** written by [JOEKSU93](#)

August 11, 2018

This app is a drug user and drug dealer app of choice in Costa Mesa California. I was shocked at all the snaps I founded on my sons phone of teens using drugs or selling them. Drugs are so easily pushed on kids these days and now they can watch their peers do it. My son was also in a group of stoners and that's how they communicated privately. There is also a locked picture area in snapchat that I dont know how to access or remove.

**Teen, 13 years old** written by [teddyesi1](#)

April 1, 2019

its not that bad i know how to erase things there i am aware of bad people i had the app for 3 years now.

**Teen, 13 years old** written by [Urwrongimnot](#)

April 16, 2019

They can technically be erased as other still see the message and they are still in the system

**Teen, 13 years old** written by [TheMarioFan](#)

June 26, 2018

my mom no longer allows this, but at least i still have YouTube and Discord, btw i didn't even use snapchat at all

**Parent** written by [Hilary S.](#)

June 8, 2018

Hi Christine, really enjoy this site and reading the reviews. My 13 year old uses Snapchat and you've really missed a big part of this app. The kids can text each other individually or in group texts thru snapchat. There has been a lot of cyberbullying in my child's middle school thru Snapchat because the texts do disappear and if the subject of the bullying tries to screen shot the message to show an adult, then the bully is notified. There are characted limits to the text messages, but the children just send 3 or 4 messages in a row to work around that. Just wanted to share with you and other parents.

**Parent of a 18+ year old** written by [Caroline Knorr](#)

June 11, 2018

Thanks for your comment. Sorry for any confusion. We added a clarification to specifically call out both individual and group texting.



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