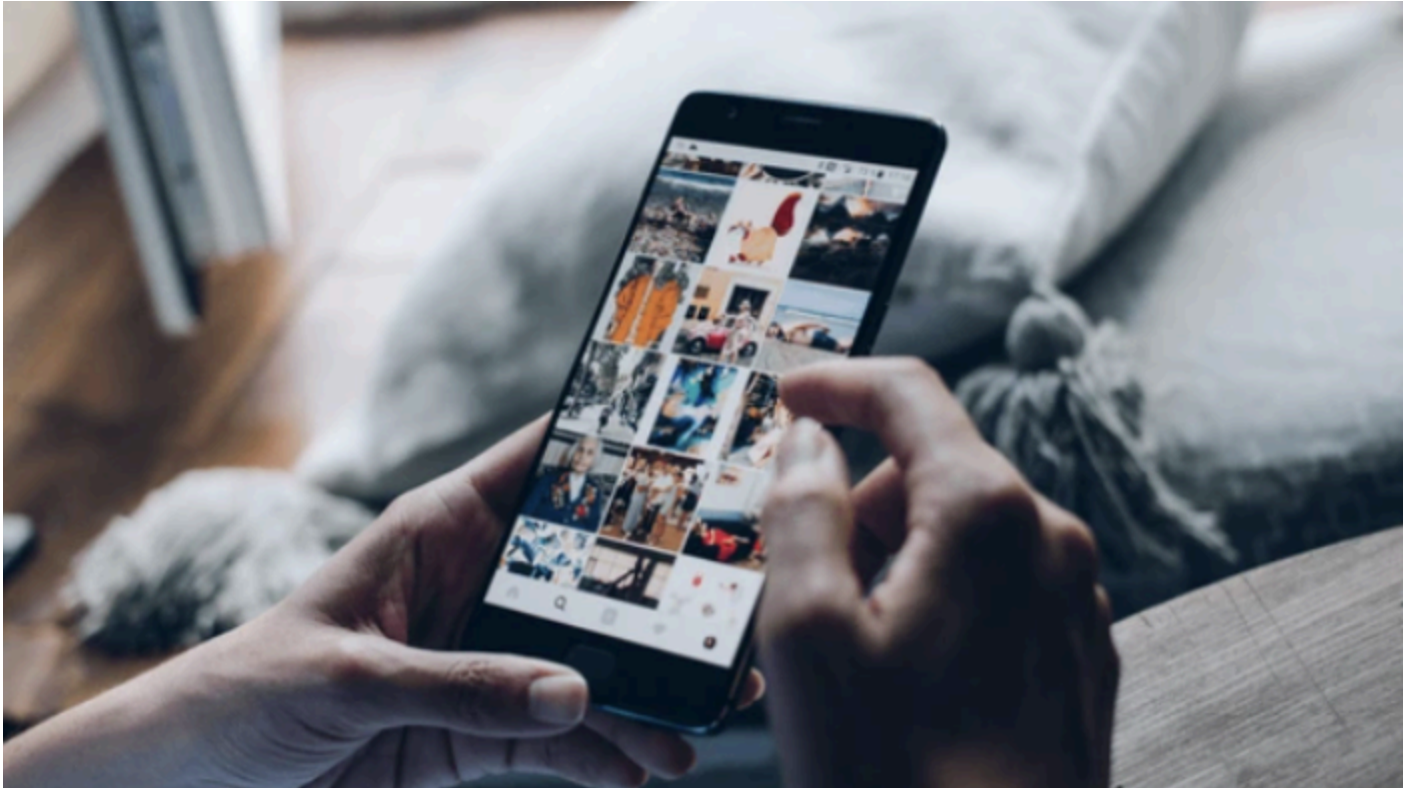


Parents' Ultimate Guide to Instagram (2024)

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Parents Need to Know

What Is Instagram?

Instagram Safety Features and Settings

Key Concerns and Solutions

Age-by-Age Considerations

Making the Most of Instagram

Parents Need to Know

- Instagram now requires age verification through video selfies or ID for most new users, though teens could possibly still bypass this by entering false information.

- While the platform now automatically creates "Teen Accounts" with safety features for users 13–17, teens who registered as 18+ before September 2024 may still have unrestricted adult accounts.
 - The platform's sophisticated algorithm quickly learns what content keeps teens engaged, potentially exposing them to concerning topics and behaviors despite safety controls.
 - Many teens maintain hidden "Finsta" accounts alongside their main profiles, allowing them to view and share unfiltered content away from parent oversight.
 - Research links Instagram use to increased anxiety and depression in teens, with particular impacts on body image and social comparison among young girls.
 - With the right guidance on privacy settings, time limits, and healthy social media habits, teens can learn to use Instagram more safely and positively.
 - In January 2025, parent company Meta announced that it would stop working with third-party fact-checking organizations and ease its rules related to hate speech and abuse on its platforms.
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What Is Instagram?

Instagram is a social media platform where teens can share photos, videos, and messages to connect with friends, follow influencers, and explore trends. Known for its visual focus, it's a creative space for self-expression and entertainment. Teens use Instagram to keep up with their peers, discover new interests, and build their online identity through carefully curated content.

How Does Instagram Work?

Unlike other social media platforms that focus mainly on entertainment or chatting, Instagram combines photos, videos, messaging, and shopping all in one place. This appeals to teens because it lets them keep up with friends, follow trends, and explore interests without switching between different apps.

- The algorithm:
 - When teens open Instagram, what they see is controlled by:
- Posts from accounts they follow
- Content similar to posts they've liked or saved
- Popular content among their age group and location
- Photos and videos their friends are engaging with
- Sponsored posts and shopping content mixed into their feed

The algorithm is particularly good at noticing what makes teens pause, rewatch, or engage with content. This means if a teen spends time looking at certain types of posts (like fashion, sports, or makeup tutorials), they'll see more of that content.

- Features that teens use most:

Teens typically spend more time viewing content than creating it on Instagram, with messaging and the Stories feature being their primary ways of interacting with friends on the platform.

- **Stories:** Quick updates that disappear in 24 hours. Teens use these for day-to-day life moments and to see what friends are doing.
- **Direct Messages (DMs):** Private messaging that's replaced texting for many teens. It's used for both one-on-one and group chats.
- **Feed:** The main scroll of photos and videos. Teens often check this several times a day to keep up with friends and interests.
- **Explore Page:** Endless recommendations of new content. Teens use this to find trending content and discover new accounts.
- **Reels:** Short-form videos that autoplay. Teens spend significant time watching these, similar to TikTok.
- **Close Friends:** A private Story feature that lets teens share more personal content with a select group.

What's the Age Requirement?

Instagram requires users to be age 13 or older. The platform uses AI and partners with the company [Yoti](#) to verify ages, requiring teens to confirm their age with a video selfie or ID.

- If teens signed up with a birth date that indicated they were 18 or older before Instagram launched Teen Accounts in September 2024, they may still have an adult account.
- Teens already registered as under 18 (before September 2024) or who are signing up for the first time with their actual birthdays are automatically placed into a Teen Account. Most new users (but not all) will be asked to provide an ID or video selfie to verify age.
- While age verification improves safety, it isn't foolproof, and some teens may bypass it by entering false information.

Is It Free?

While Instagram is free to download and use, it's designed to encourage spending in several ways:

- **Instagram Shop:** Built-in shopping features let users browse and buy products directly through photos, videos, and Stories. Users must be 18+ to make purchases
- **Sponsored Posts:** Influencer content and ads are seamlessly added into the main feed, Stories, and Reels, making it hard to distinguish from regular content
- **Creator Subscriptions:** Users can pay monthly fees to access exclusive content from their favorite creators
- **Digital Gifts:** Users can send paid "badges" during live streams or "gifts" on Reels to support creators
- **Paid Partnerships:** Influencers promote products through sponsored posts, often in ways that feel like authentic recommendations
- **Targeted Advertising:** Personalized shopping ads appear throughout the app, especially in Stories and the Explore page

What You Can Do:

- Have open conversations about spending. Instead of strict rules, talk about making thoughtful choices about purchases
- Look at Instagram's Family Center together to understand what purchase controls are available
- Consider removing saved payment methods to avoid accidental purchases and create a natural pause before buying

- Talk with your teen about how posts make them feel when they see something they want to buy. What makes certain products feel "must-have"?

How Are Teens Really Using Instagram?

- **Messaging and Staying Connected:** They use DMs and Story features more often than traditional texting today. They chat with friends, keep up with what peers are doing, and manage different group conversations, all in one place. They often use disappearing messages for private conversations.
- **Watching More Than Posting:** Most teens spend more time watching Reels (short videos) and scrolling through posts than sharing their own photos or videos.
- **Using Different Accounts:** Most teens have at least two accounts. One tends to be a carefully curated main profile for family and general followers, and another might be a private "finsta" or "spam" account where they share more authentic, unfiltered content with close friends.

Instagram Safety Features and Settings

Instagram offers several built-in tools to help protect teens, but parents need to know how to use them effectively.

- **Teen Accounts:** Instagram automatically places new users age 13 to 17 into Teen Accounts with built-in safety settings, including:
 - **Private Accounts:** Only approved followers can view posts, Stories, and Reels, which limits exposure to unwanted interactions.
 - **Content Controls:** Teens see less sensitive content in search results and recommendations.
 - **Time Limits and Sleep Mode:** Teens receive reminders to take breaks after 60 minutes of use, and notifications are muted from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m.
 - **Hidden Words:** Offensive comments and message requests are automatically filtered out (though filtering isn't perfect).
 - **Parental Approvals:** Teens under 16 need a parent's permission to make settings less strict.
- **Parental Controls Through Family Center:** Parents can link their account to their teen's account and:
 - See who their teen is messaging and the topics they're exploring.
 - See the accounts your teen follows and who follows them.
 - Set and adjust safety settings to fit their teen's needs.

Key Concerns and Solutions

Is Instagram Affecting My Teen's Mental Health?

Instagram's focus on perfect images and getting "likes" can impact teens' well-being. Research shows this constant curation takes a toll on teens because:

- Every photo becomes a chance to be judged.
- Their actual experiences feel less valuable if they're not "Instagram-worthy."
- The fear of missing out (FOMO) drives compulsive checking.

- Teens feel anxious about maintaining their online image.

The platform particularly affects teenage girls' body image and self-esteem through:

- Filtered photos that create unrealistic beauty standards
- "Like" counts and follower numbers, which become measures of social worth
- The constant pressure to appear perfect and happy
- Content that promotes harmful body images and eating habits

What You Can Do:

- **Use Instagram's time limit settings together:** Discuss which boundaries feel reasonable. Teens engage better when they help set their own usage limits. Bonus if you model setting your own time limits alongside them.
- **Enable Instagram's "Quiet Mode" for nighttime hours:** Explore how this affects their sleep and mood. Share observations supportively: "I've noticed you seem more rested since we started night mode. What do you think?"
- **Regularly clean up their feed together:** Review their followed accounts together from time to time, discussing how various content makes them feel. Use Instagram's "Not Interested" feature to adjust the algorithm away from content that increases anxiety.
- **Listen when your teen talks about Instagram stress:** Validate their feelings before suggesting solutions: "That sounds really hard. Would you tell me more?" This helps build trust and encourages future sharing.
- **Watch for warning signs** like significant changes in sleep, withdrawal from activities, or excessive anxiety about posts. If these persist, consult a mental health professional.

What's a "Finsta," and Should I Be Worried About My Teen Having One?

A "finsta" (fake Instagram) is a private account where teens share more real, unfiltered moments with close friends. Unlike their main account that parents see, a finsta shows the messier and often more realistic parts of their lives they don't want family to see. (They may also maintain an anonymous account to view or post on the open platform.)

Why Teens Have Them:

- Share authentic moments without judgment
- Express feelings they don't want everyone to see
- Connect with just their closest friends
- Avoid family monitoring their real social life or knowing they have social media
- Relief from the pressure of perfection and freedom to be silly or vulnerable

What You Can Do:

- **Review Instagram's "Close Friends" feature as a safer alternative** to secondary accounts, discussing how it provides privacy within platform guidelines.
- **Focus on building trust rather than monitoring:** Research shows teens are more likely to share concerns with parents who respect their growing need for privacy while remaining available for support.

- **Discuss digital footprints through real examples:** "Let's look at how different people manage their professional versus personal content." This helps teens think critically about the long-term impact of what they do online.
- **Regularly check Family Center insights** about followed accounts and new connections: Use this info to start supportive conversations rather than accusations.
- **Create family agreements about appropriate content** across all accounts.

What Dangerous Content Could My Teen Encounter on Instagram?

Despite Instagram's rules, teens can easily find harmful content that could impact their safety and well-being.

Most Common Dangerous Content:

- Drug sales (often using coded language and emojis)
- Dangerous pills and substances, including fentanyl
- Promotion of disordered eating, often hidden in "wellness" content
- Self-harm and suicide-related material
- Sexual content and exploitation
- Viral challenges that encourage risky behavior

How They Find This Content:

Even without searching for it, harmful content reaches teens through:

- Suggested accounts and Explore Page recommendations
- Trending hashtags that seem innocent
- In comment sections of popular posts
- Direct messages from strangers
- Private accounts that parents don't know about

What You Can Do:

- **Enable Instagram's "Sensitive Content Control" settings in Family Center:** Explain how they work to reduce exposure to harmful material. Teens are more open to these settings when they understand the "why."
- **Use the "Hidden Words" feature to filter concerning language:** Customize the filter list together to adjust what teens see in comments and messages.
- **Set up message controls through Family Center:** Limit who can contact your teen, and discuss why certain restrictions help keep them safe.
- **Create an action plan together for handling harmful content or pressure from others:** Include specific steps and trusted adults they can contact.
- **Review Explore Page content together occasionally:** Use Instagram's "Not Interested" feature to train the algorithm away from inappropriate content.
- **Discuss how to recognize and report harmful content.**

How Can I Protect My Teen from Real-World Safety Risks on Instagram?

Instagram posts can reveal more personal information than teens realize. This has led to real incidents of stalking, home break-ins during vacations, and predators piecing together teens' daily routines from their social media footprint.

Common Safety Concerns:

- Location sharing through post tags and Stories
- School identifiers in uniforms or backgrounds
- Regular routines revealed through posting patterns
- Real-time posting that shows when homes are empty or where teens are in the moment
- Personal information pieced together from multiple posts
- Photos that reveal valuable items or home layouts
- Group photos that tag and identify friends

What You Can Do:

- **Develop posting guidelines together:** You can balance protecting privacy with respecting their desire to share. Example: waiting to post about events until after they're over.
- **Use Instagram's location tag controls:** Limit location sharing, and explain the real privacy implications for their lives.
- **Practice identifying personal information:** What might be revealed in the backgrounds of their photos? Make it a collaborative learning experience rather than a lecture.

How Can I Protect My Teen from Online Predators on Instagram?

Predators use Instagram to target teens through comments, direct messages, and fake accounts. Recent cases have shown an increase in sextortion, where predators trick teens into sending private photos, then threaten to share them unless teens pay money or send more images.

How Predators Usually Work: They start by seeming friendly and harmless, often by:

- Making casual comments on public posts
- Pretending to be teens
- Giving lots of attention and compliments
- Claiming shared interests or mutual friends
- Using multiple backup accounts if blocked
- Moving conversations to other apps or vanishing messages

Watch for changes in your teen's behavior like:

- Being secretive about Instagram activity
- Quickly hiding their screen when you approach
- Getting messages or gifts from unknown people
- Spending unusual amounts of time on the app
- Acting anxious when they can't check Instagram

What You Can Do:

- **Use Instagram's message controls to block strangers from sending your teen DMs:** Talk with them about why some people online might not be who they say they are.
- **Look through your teen's follower list in Family Center:** Do this alongside them from time to time—this opens up conversation and makes it feel less like you're spying.
- **Show your teen how to use the Restrict, Mute, and Block buttons on Instagram:** Make sure they know it's OK to use these features if anyone makes them feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- **Save all evidence:** Take screenshots of messages, photos, and the account profile before blocking them. Instagram messages can disappear, so documentation is crucial for law enforcement.
- **Use Instagram's in-app reporting tool** to flag the account, and know when to contact the authorities.
 - Contact your local law enforcement if:
 - There are credible threats of violence
 - Personal information is being shared without consent
 - There's evidence of child exploitation or other criminal activity.
 - Instagram's response is delayed or inadequate.

What Should I Do About Cyberbullying on Instagram?

Instagram bullying can be especially hard on teens because it can happen both publicly through comments and privately through messages. Bullying often includes mean comments, harassment in DMs, "hate accounts" that target specific teens, using Close Friends lists to exclude others, and sharing embarrassing screenshots.

Signs Your Teen Might Be Experiencing Cyberbullying:

- Suddenly wanting to quit Instagram or becoming anxious about notifications
- Deleting their account or starting over
- Being excluded from group photos or events
- Finding their photos being used to make fun of them
- Becoming withdrawn or showing signs of depression

What You Can Do:

If Your Teen Is Being Bullied:

- **Document everything:** Save screenshots of bullying messages, comments, or posts. Instagram's reporting system works best with clear evidence.
- Use Instagram's tools to:
 - Filter harmful comments.
 - Block bullying accounts.
 - Restrict problematic followers.
 - Report harassing content.
- **Keep communication open:** Let your teen know they can talk to you without losing Instagram privileges. Teens are more likely to ask for help when they don't fear punishment.
- **Contact school officials** if classmates are involved, or law enforcement for more serious threats.

If Your Teen Is Bullying Others:

- **Address the behavior directly but calmly:** "I'm concerned about some of your online behavior. Let's talk about what's really going on."
- **Use Instagram's Family Center to temporarily limit account access** while working through the issue.
- **Help them understand real consequences:** damaged relationships, school discipline, or even legal trouble.
- **Explore what's triggering this behavior:** Often teens who bully are struggling themselves.
- **Seek professional help if the behavior continues:** Counselors can help teens develop empathy and better coping skills.

Why Is My Teen Obsessed with Likes and Followers?

Understanding how Instagram's social validation system affects teens is crucial for helping them maintain a healthy perspective.

How the Numbers Game Works:

- Likes and followers become measures of social status.
- The algorithm promotes already-popular content.
- Comment counts signal social engagement.
- Story view counts show social reach (how many other accounts see your content).
- Instagram highlights engagement through notifications.
- Popular posts may appear on Explore pages, creating a cycle.

Impact on Teens:

- Anxiety about post performance
- Deleting posts that don't get enough engagement
- Posting at specific times to maximize likes
- Comparing their numbers to peers
- Feeling pressure to maintain a steady stream of content
- Using artificial means, like buying bots, to boost engagement
- Measuring self-worth through metrics

What You Can Do:

- Help teens understand how engagement metrics are manipulated
- Discuss the difference between online and real-world connections
- Encourage authentic posting rather than chasing likes
- Point out how even influencers struggle with these pressures
- Support interests and achievements outside of Instagram
- Model healthy social media habits yourself
- Consider hiding "like" counts using Instagram's built-in option

Age-by-Age Considerations

Young Teens (13–14)

What to Expect:

Young teens are likely just starting to explore social media and often feel pressure to join Instagram when their friends start using it. They're likely to focus heavily on likes and comments as validation, spend more time watching content than posting, and may feel intense pressure when friends start getting accounts. Their understanding of privacy and long-term consequences is still developing.

Safety Approach:

- Set up Instagram's Teen Account features together. Explain how each safety setting helps protect them while still letting them connect with friends.
- Keep their account private, and use Family Center to review their follower requests together at first.
- Show them how to use Instagram's "Close Friends" feature as a safer way to share personal content.
- Start with stricter message controls through Family Center, gradually adjusting as they demonstrate responsible use.
- Monitor their time limits and break reminders. Have open discussions about finding balance.

Conversation Starters & Activities:

- Help them understand their digital footprint: "Let's look at some public Instagram accounts you like. What do you notice about what they choose to share or keep private?" This helps teens think critically about online presence while they're just starting to build their own.
- Finding their digital voice: "What kind of things do you want to share or express on Instagram? Let's talk about ways to do that while feeling comfortable and safe." This encourages teens to think about authentic self-expression while building awareness of healthy boundaries, helping them develop confidence in their online presence from the start.
- Activity: Create a "Digital Values" checklist together, listing what types of content they feel comfortable sharing publicly vs. privately on Instagram. Use this as a guide when reviewing their privacy settings and helping them make posting decisions.

Mid-Teens (15–16)

What to Expect:

Mid-teens become more sophisticated Instagram users, focused on curating their aesthetic and building their personal brand. Developmental research shows they're especially vulnerable to social comparison and body image concerns at this age. They're likely to be more invested in Reels creation and may want to grow their following.

Safety Approach:

- Shift to collaborative decisions about privacy settings, but maintain key protections in Family Center.
- Help them understand how Instagram's algorithm works to show them certain content.
- Discuss digital footprint implications for college and future opportunities.
- Support healthy ways to handle social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors.
- Guide them in balancing creative expression with online safety.

Conversation Starters & Activities:

- Managing social pressure: "How do you decide what to share on your main feed versus your Stories?" This opens discussions about authenticity and the pressure to appear perfect on Instagram.
- Exploring content choices: "I've been learning about how Instagram's algorithm works to understand what shows up on my feed. What kinds of posts keep showing up in your Explore page? Do you like what it shows you?" This opens a discussion about their consumption of content and the influence of algorithms while respecting their independence.
- Activity: Do a joint "feed audit" where they show you content they find uplifting versus draining. You can do the same to model healthy social media habits. Use Instagram's "Not Interested" and "Restrict" features to help shape a more positive experience. Check in a week later to see how their refreshed feed makes them feel, and share how *yours* makes you feel.

Making the Most of Instagram

Instagram can help teens connect with supportive communities, explore their interests, and express their authentic selves. By moving away from focusing on "perfect" curated content, teens can use the platform to share real moments, build meaningful connections, and find inspiration in positive and supportive spaces. Features like Close Friends and Stories encourage sharing in a more private and authentic way, while Reels allow them to explore creativity without the pressure of perfection.

With your guidance and the tools outlined in this guide, teens can develop habits that prioritize growth and self-expression over comparison or validation. By fostering conversations about purposeful use and helping them create boundaries, Instagram can become a platform that fuels their creativity, builds confidence, and celebrates who they truly are.



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