

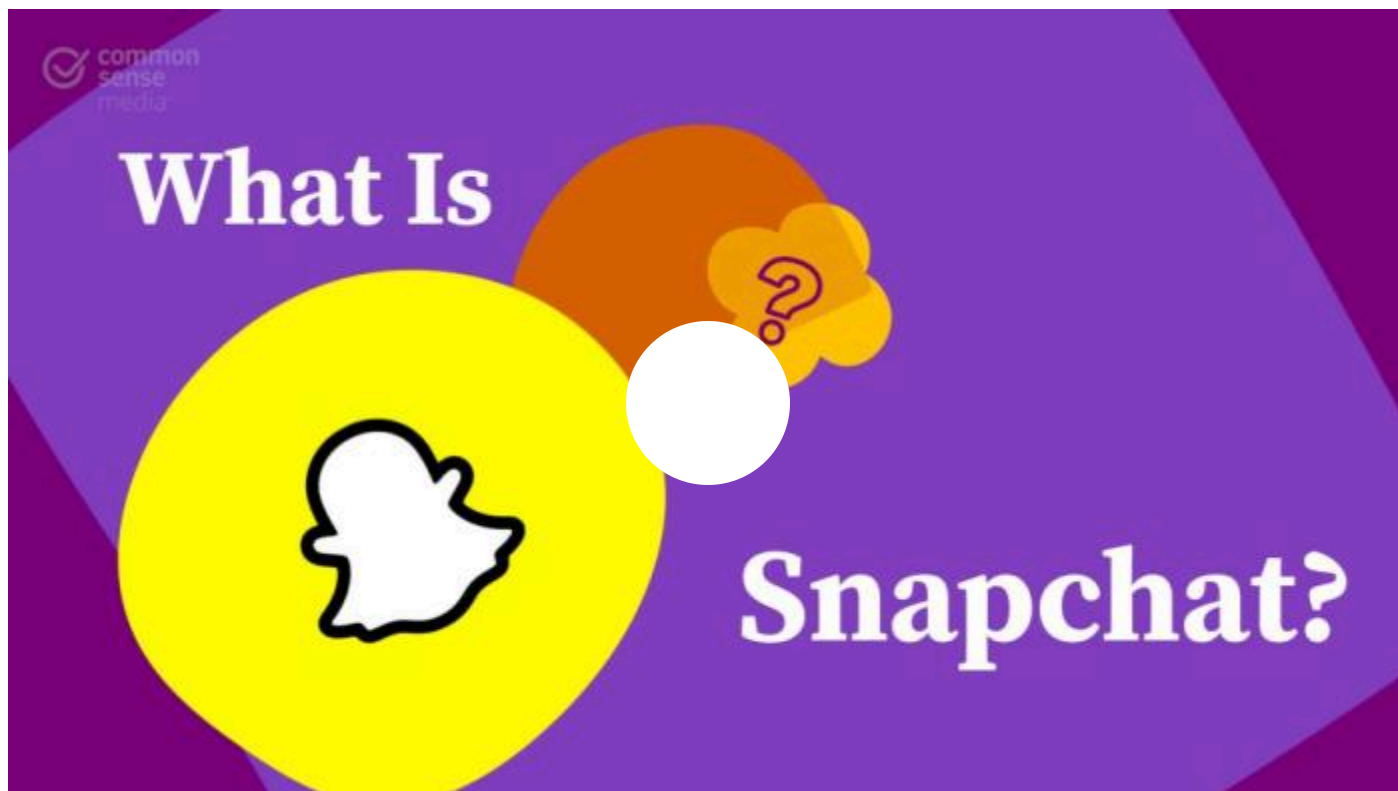
Parents' Ultimate Guide to Snapchat

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.

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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. The essential function is to take a picture or video, add filters, lenses, or other effects, and share it with friends. The app is free to download, and also has a premium subscription plan called Snapchat+. (Note: If you're looking for more parental insights on your kids' favorite things online, sign up for our [family movie night newsletter](#).)

How does Snapchat work?

All you need to sign up is your name, an email address or a phone number, and your birth date. 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, you usually start the communication by sending a photo or video, not a text message. To begin a conversation, you tap the big camera circle and take a snap. There are all sorts of photo-editing tools, as well as filters to decorate your images and videos. Once you customize your "snap," you can send it to anyone on your friends list, add it to [your story](#) (which is a record of the day that your friends can view for 24 hours), and add it to Snap Map (which displays your photo on a map of your location that can be viewed by anyone on Snapchat).

Snapchat provides several options for sharing and managing snaps. In addition to individual messaging, Snapchat offers group chats 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.

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. If someone uses their phone to take a screenshot of what you sent, you will be notified. But screen captures from third-party apps don't trigger a notification. For these reasons, it's best for teens to understand that

nothing done online is really temporary. Before sending a snap of themselves or someone else, it's important to remember that it's out of their control after it's shared.

What are Snapstreaks?

A Snapstreak represents the number of days users snap each other. To achieve a Snapstreak, two users must have snapped back and forth with one another in a 24-hour period for three days in a row or more. Once you've established a streak, special emojis and statistics display next to your names to show how long you've maintained a streak. Why do they matter? For one thing, they most likely add to your overall Snapchat score (basically a number that reflects how much you use the app).

Because of the intense bonds that children can form over social media, they can feel that a Snapstreak is a measure of their friendship...and that 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 a good idea to talk with your kids about how they use the app.

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. Kids can submit snaps to the Snap Map, and their name and location could appear on a public map. But the bigger 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 where it's 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. 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. Snapchat+ subscribers can set them to expire after anywhere from an hour to a week. Or, if you think your snap is particularly interesting or newsworthy, you can submit it to be featured in the Spotlight section, which features a mix of snaps that have been identified as entertaining viewing. Snaps are curated and compiled by the company. While it's cool to have your story added to the Spotlight roundup, 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 become friends on the app, 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 Snapchat Discover?

The Discover area of the app 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 or outlandish (such as people with extreme plastic surgery or rare medical conditions). 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 that prompt 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?

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:

- **Cameos:** These are animated GIFs featuring your selfie that you can send in a chat. Snapchat offers dozens of video options to add your image to, including "duets" where you and a friend appear together.
- **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 look like they're part of the photo. Technically, lenses are "overlays" -- and they cost money on Snapchat.
- **Geofilters:** 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 for them. A kid could create a special geo-filter for their sweet-16 party for attendees to add to their photos.
- **Memories:** If you don't want your snaps to disappear, you can store them to send and view again later. My Eyes Only is a way to save Memories behind a passcode so that no one else can see them.
- **Snap Store:** This is exactly what it sounds like: a place to buy Snapchat-related items.
- **Scan:** Users can find out what song is playing, scan a dog to identify its breed, and use this feature to locate other information.
- **Snap Games:** Co-play games with voice/text chat and ads, launched from the chat section to play with friends.

- **Sounds:** TikTok-like feature that allows users to include music with snaps.
- **Spotlight:** This is another TikTok-like feature that collects snaps submitted by users into one giant feed. Once you send in a Spotlight, it's public and can be viewed by anyone on or off the platform.

Is Snapchat safe for preteens 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 safety valve. 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 distraction. 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 out and not using the app for fun, it's time to step in.

Privacy and safety. Since it's so easy to add friends on 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 app's Family Center gives parents and caregivers some visibility of their child's usage, including who their child has been communicating with. Adults have to install the app and link their accounts by adding their child as a friend. Their child then needs to accept an invitation to opt in to the Family Center functionality. You won't be able to see specific content your child has sent or received—just their friend list and who they've sent messages, photos, or videos to in the last seven days.

In January 2024, the app announced some new Family Center features. Parents and caregivers will now be able to view their child's privacy settings. Additionally, families will have the option to restrict their kids from using My AI, the app's AI chatbot.

If your kid uses Snapchat, talk with them about the privacy settings. Sit down with your child and together go into the app's settings. This is a perfect time to chat 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 that, 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.

Read Common Sense Media's full review of [Snapchat](#) to learn more.

Christine Elgersma, senior editor of learning content, contributed to this article.



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