

Apps to Help Keep Track of What Your Kids Are Doing Online

Though open communication is best, these tools can help parents who want a little extra control.

By *Christine Elgersma*

As kids become more independent, we want to foster their sense of responsibility and give them room to prove themselves. But it can be difficult to navigate this natural separation, especially when kids are doing who-knows-what on their devices. There are constant questions: Where are they? Who's contacting them? What are they doing online? Since tweens and teens are often tight-lipped about their lives, it can be tricky to get clear answers.

Though direct communication is always best, and the conversations around **online safety and digital citizenship** should start long before a kid becomes a teen, there are occasions when parents feel it's necessary to **monitor what kids are doing on their devices**. Maybe they've broken your trust or you're worried about their safety. Whatever the case, there are tools to track what your kid is up to. Be aware that spying on your kid can backfire and that kids can find a way around just about any type of tracking. But if you're at the end of your rope or just need extra help managing your kid's digital life, then one of these tools might work for you. To get more information, check out our **advice about cell phone issues**, including **basic parental controls**, and less invasive (and expensive) ways to **limit access to content**.

Bark: Similar to VISR (see below), kids and parents need to work together to hook up accounts to the service. It also analyzes all device activity and alerts parents when a problem is found. If they get an alert, parents will see the content in question and get suggestions on how to handle it (\$9/month).

Circle Home and Go: This app manages the Circle with Disney device, which pairs with your home Wi-Fi and controls all Wi-Fi-enabled devices. Can create time limits on specific apps, filter content, set bedtimes, and restrict internet access for the whole house or for individuals. Circle Go will let parents filter, limit, and track on networks outside the home Wi-Fi (the **Circle device** is \$99, the Circle Home app is free, and the Circle Go service will be \$9.95/month).

Limitly: If screen time and specific app use is your concern, this system might work for you. It lets you track your kid's app use and limit time using the device or certain apps (free, Android-only).

Pocket Guardian: Parents get alerts when sexting, bullying, or explicit images are detected on your kid's device, though you won't see the actual content or who it's from. Instead, the alert can prompt a conversation, and the app offers resources to help (\$9.99-\$12.99/month).

Trackidz: With this program, you don't see specific content from your kid's device, but you can track app installations and use, block browsers and apps, manage time in apps and on the device, block out device-free time, grant bonus time, track location, get an alert when your kid's phone is turned off, and see your kid's contacts. It also claims to detect cyberbullying by tracking when your kid's device use drops dramatically, which can indicate avoidance. Setting up a geo-fence lets parents track a kid's location and alerts them when a kid has gone outside the boundaries, and a kid can tap the power button to send an emergency message to parents (currently free, but will be \$6.99).

VISR: For this one to work, a parent needs the kid's usernames and passwords, so be aware that it's easy for kids to set up dummy accounts. Once enabled, the tool analyzes posts and emails for bullying, profanity, nudity, violence, drugs, and late-night use and sends parents alerts when anything iffy is detected (currently free, but will be \$5/month).

How do I keep my kid safe on the Internet?

Internet safety goes **way beyond protecting kids from strangers or blocking inappropriate content**. It's about helping your kids use the Internet productively and practice **safe, responsible online behavior** -- especially when you're not there to answer their questions or check in on where they've ventured. Keep in mind that what may seem like basic knowledge to parents is new to kids just getting started in the digital world. Having a conversation **before your kid embarks online** helps set expectations and establish ground rules. Here are the basic guidelines to share with your kid:

- Follow your family's rules about when and where to use the Internet.
- Be polite, kind, and respectful.
- Understand a website's rules, and know how to flag other users for misbehavior.
- Recognize "red flags," including someone asking you personal questions such as your name and address.
- Never share your name, your school's name, your age, your phone number, or your email or home address with strangers.
- Never send pictures to strangers.
- Keep passwords private (except from parents).
- Never open a message from a stranger; it may contain a virus that can harm a computer.
- Immediately tell an adult if something mean or creepy happens.

5 Questions to Ask Before You Get Your Kid a Phone

Make sure they (and you!) are ready for the next step with conversation starters that get everyone on the same page. By [Sierra Filucci](#)

You're on your way to pick up your kid after school, and traffic is crawling or your train is delayed or your car breaks down. If only your kid had a phone, you could tell him you'll be late. It's moments like these that lead many parents to get their tweens or teens their first phones. But even though the convenience is compelling -- and your kid has probably been begging for one -- how do you know he's really ready?

If you're considering a smartphone for your kid, you'll need to think through a few things, from who will pay for it to whether she's responsible enough to use it appropriately. But once you decide to take the plunge, start the conversation with these five questions. Also, consider requiring your kid to complete [Digital Compass](#) (a Common Sense Media game that teaches digital citizenship) before handing over the device.

Why do you want a cell phone?

The answer to this question will help you understand what to expect once she gets the phone and where she might need some limits. Does she want to text with friends? Or play Crossy Road for hours?

Do you understand the rules your family and school have for phone use?

Most kids know they have to answer yes to this question, but it can help start the conversation about your family and school's expectations around how the phone is used, from whether they can download apps without permission to how they can or can't use the phone in the classroom. Be sure to discuss the consequences if rules are broken.

What are some concerns you think your family and teachers have about phones?

This question helps you understand what your kid thinks are the main sources of tension around kids and phone use. You can use this conversation to clarify any of your concerns, such as how often your kid is on the phone, whether he uses social media apps, and how to handle a call or text from a stranger.

What are five places it's not OK to use your phone?

Phone etiquette and safety are ongoing conversations, since kids will be experiencing some phone situations for the first time. But this is a good time to lay down the absolute basics, like no staring at your phone when Grandma's talking, no taking photos in locker rooms, no phones at the dinner table, and so on.

What will you do if you lose or break your phone?

Unfortunately, this is a real possibility. Talk about whether the phone will be replaced and, if so, who pays for it. Is insurance an option? Discuss options for preventing loss or breakage.

9 Social Media Red Flags Parents Should Know About

Find out which social media features are cause for concern -- no matter which app your kid is using.

By *Christine Elgersma*

It can be hard to keep up with the latest apps that kids are using. Just when you've figured out how to talk to your kids about *Facebook*, **they've moved on to *Instagram* or *Snapchat***. But here's the deal: Even when new apps come along, adding new features such as the ability to disappear or track your location, they're often not that different from other apps. And if you know what to look for, you can help your kid avoid some common social media pitfalls such as **drama**, **cyberbullying**, and **oversharing**.

Does a red flag mean your kid shouldn't use a particular app? Not at all. Most kids use social media apps safely -- and kids don't always use every feature of every app. Also, you can often disable certain features so they're no longer a problem. Finally, talking about using social media safely, responsibly, and respectfully is the best way to help your kid identify and avoid red flags. Here are the most common social media red flags, the apps they're found in, and tips for dealing with them.

Age-inappropriate content. Some examples: ***Ask.fm*, *Tumblr*, *Vine***

Friends can share explicit stuff via messaging (for example, sexting), but the bigger concern is whether an app features a lot of user-generated content that isn't appropriate to your kid's age. Your teen may not even need to follow users who are posting explicit stuff to come across it.

- **What to do:** Ask your kid whom she follows, and ask to see what's being posted. Use the app yourself and get a sense of what comes up in an average feed. Then try searching for content you're concerned about and see how easy it is to find. Check the terms of use to see what the app allows and whether users can flag violators.

Public default settings. Some examples: ***Instagram*, *Tumblr*, *Twitter*, *Vine*, *Ask.fm***

Many apps allow a user to have a public or private profile, only shared with friends; however, some apps are public by default, which means that a kid's name, picture, and posts are available to everyone.

- **What to do:** As soon as you download the app, go into the settings to check the defaults. If a kid is using the same program on a browser, check there, too.

Location tracking and sharing. Some examples: ***Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Snapchat*, *Instagram*, *Messenger***

Wherever you go, there you are -- and your social media apps know it. Though you may only indicate a city or neighborhood in a profile, allowing location identification often means that you're tracked within a city block, and your posts may include your location.

- **What to do:** Turn off location settings on the phone AND in the app; check to see whether previous posts include location information, and delete it.

Real-time video streaming. Some examples: *YouNow, Periscope, Meerkat (Facebook soon)*

Live streaming is just that -- live -- so it's very easy to share something you didn't mean to. Kids may use these apps in private (such as in their bedrooms) and inadvertently share personal information without knowing exactly who is watching. Though they may seem temporary, embarrassing or mean moments are easily captured and shared later.

- **What to do:** Talk to your kids about why they want to share video of themselves and what they should and shouldn't share. Talk about positive, constructive uses of video sharing, such as creating shorts using editing programs or creating an interest-based channel to funnel your teen's creativity.

Ads and in-app purchases. Some examples: *Kik, Line, Snapchat, Facebook*

Free apps have to get paid somehow, and many developers do it through advertising and providing purchase opportunities. Some track what you buy and show you targeted ads, and some even have targeted chats with businesses, which means your kid is invited into a chat with someone trying to sell a product.

- **What to do:** Know what's available in the app and set limits around purchases. Check out the types of ads coming at your kids, teach them to recognize all the kinds of digital marketing, and talk about what to do if they're approached online by someone trying to sell something.

"Temporary" pictures and videos. Some examples: *Snapchat, Burn Note, Yik Yak, Line, Meerkat, Periscope, YouNow*

Nothing shared between devices is truly temporary, even when an app builds its whole marketing around it. Compromising pictures and texts get kids in real trouble because they believe what they're sending is private and will disappear.

- **What to do:** Let your kids know that nothing they send is truly temporary, and it's easy for others to share what you've sent. Because it's often hard for kids to really consider consequences, and they might think it won't happen to them, it might be worth sharing some of the **recent cases** of kids getting in legal trouble because of "disappearing" pictures.

Subpar reporting tools. Some examples: *Yik Yak, Snapchat, Omegle, Yeti - Campus Stories*

Most apps have a system for reporting abuse or violations of the terms of use -- but not all do. The level of moderation also varies widely. Some apps monitor posts or use automated filters to flag content.

- **What to do:** Read the terms of service to get an idea of what's allowed and how much posts are moderated, and have your kids read it, too. Make sure they know how to report harassment and block other users when necessary.

Anonymity. Some examples: *Yik Yak, Whisper, Ask.fm, Omegle*

Anonymity doesn't always breed cruelty, but it often does. On anonymous sites, people feel that their comments are consequence-free -- and end up hurting others. Also, though kids may feel safe enough to share sensitive or painful things they might not otherwise, they often don't get the necessary support or help -- and may get attacked.

- **What to do:** Make sure your teen understands the risks involved and that they know how to block and report other users if necessary. Also, if they need connection but it's hard to talk about a problem (especially with you), give them opportunities to share with other safe, trusted people.

Cyberbullying. Some examples: *Yik Yak*, *Ask.fm*, *Burnbook* (only website right now)

Though many apps have improved their monitoring and reporting features, cyberbullying is still a reality. It can happen on any social media app, but some have a notorious mean streak. If an app allows anonymous posting and is used in schools, chances are some teens will abuse it.

- **What to do:** Ask around and pay attention to what parents, teachers, and other kids say about it to get a sense if it's stirring up trouble. Make sure your teen understands how to report and block other users, and check the school's policy about cyberbullying.

What can I tell my kid to do if he or she is being cyberbullied?

Kids may not always recognize teasing as bullying. Some kids also may be too embarrassed or ashamed to talk to their parents about it. That's why it's important to talk about **online and digital behavior** before your child starts interacting with others online and with devices. To prepare your kid for going online or getting a cell phone, or, if you know he or she has been bullied online, offer these steps he or she can take immediately:

Communicate appropriately. Use the right language for your audience. You might write or speak to a teacher differently from a friend. And never use all caps!

Keep private things private. Don't share personal information, including passwords, your home address, inappropriate images, and gossip.

Respect others. Be courteous. Disagree politely.

Don't lie, steal, or cheat. Don't try to deceive others. Remember to give credit where credit is due. And, although it's easy to copy others' work, download things without permission, or use game cheat codes, don't do it.

Be an "upstander." If someone you know is being targeted by a bully, stand up for that person. You would want him or her to do the same for you.

Report misbehavior. The Internet is a giant community, and you can help it be a nice place.

Follow your family's rules. If your parent tells you to avoid certain websites or to stop texting after a certain time, listen. The more you act responsibly, the more privileges you'll get.

Think before you post, text, or share. Consider how you and others might feel after you've posted something. It's not always easy to take back what you've said online, and your online behavior can create a lasting footprint.

5 Strategies for Getting Kids Off Devices

Ever try to pry a tablet from sticky fingers? Check out these tips to avoid the tantrum.

By *Christine Elgersma*

“Just a sec,” say nine out of 10 parents answering an email when their kid asks them for something. If it’s hard for us to jump out of the digital world, just imagine you’re 3 and the lines between fantasy and reality are already blurred -- then throw in a super-engaging, colorful, fun, immersive experience. Or you’re 5 and each episode of *Mutt & Stuff* on the **Nick Jr. app** is better than the last. Or you’re 8 and you’re almost finished building something amazing in *Minecraft*. Why would you ever want to stop?

This is why getting kids off their devices is so tough. And when threatening doesn’t work, and you discover the **research** that two-minute warnings aren’t the best option either, what can you do? Thankfully, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has some **new guidelines** around screen use that ease some parental guilt, but you still need to get your kid off the iPad at some point. Aside from being a strong role model, try these tips to minimize conflict and find the balance we’re all seeking.

- **Have another activity lined up (bonus points for making it seem fun).** For the youngest device users, transitions are hard -- period. Even if the next “to do” is a “must do” (such as eating lunch), tell your kid what’s coming next. You can rehearse the process: “When I say stop, it’s time for the iPad to go night-night. Let’s see how fast you can flip it shut! As soon as it’s asleep, we can sneak into the other room and paint.”
- **Use visual and sound cues to help kids keep track of time limits.** For kids who don’t yet know how to tell time, try a **timer** that can help put them in charge of the process: “When the time is up, it’ll look and sound like this.”
- **Find apps with built-in timers.** Video streamers like **Cakey** and **Huvi** throw parents a bone and have internal timers so the app stops on its own. Then it’s up to the parent to make sure kiddo doesn’t just jump into another app.
- **Tell kids to stop at a natural break, such as the end of an episode, level, or activity.** It’s hard for kids (and adults!) to stop in the middle of something. Before your kid gets on a device, talk about what they want to do or play, what will be a good place to stop, and how long they think it’ll take. Set the limit together and hold to it, though a little wiggle room (a couple of minutes so they can finish) is fine.
- **Discuss consequences and follow through when kids test the limits.** When all else fails, it’s important to have discussed consequences for when your kid won’t give it up. For little kids, the line can be something like, “If it’s too hard to turn off, the tablet has to go away for a whole day.” For older kids it’s more about keeping devices in a public space, setting expectations, and enforcing them. If they show you they can be partners in moderating and regulating themselves, there can be more flexibility.