

Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

Snapchat, Kik, and 6 More Iffy Messaging Apps Teens Love, Cool new apps give teens lots more opportunities to overshare (or worse).

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When people say, "There's an app for that," they're not kidding -- especially when it comes to connecting with others. **Instead of using only one way to send messages**, teens (and adults) are using lots of different apps to share a secret here, stalk a crush there, or post a selfie anywhere.

Depending on what they want to say and to whom, teens choose the app that best fits their needs. If they don't want a message to hang around, they'll use a temporary app **such as Snapchat**. If they want to remain anonymous, they'll use an app **such as Yik Yak**. On the plus side, new messaging options let teens share **with a smaller audience** than social media apps such as *Facebook*, where teens may have hundreds of friends. This so-called "narrowcasting" (as opposed to broadcasting) is probably a positive trend and prevents some oversharing. But it doesn't mean teens can't still get themselves in trouble.

Though most teens are only sharing day-to-day moments with an already-tight social group, there can be unintended consequences when teens think temporary messages really disappear forever or when they make mean comments under cover of anonymous apps. Here's what you need to know about the anonymous and disappearing-message apps you're likely to find on your kid's phone:

Anonymous Apps and Sites

On the positive side, going incognito online helps us express ourselves in ways we might not be able to in the real world. On the negative side, anonymous apps are often riddled with inappropriate content. They also can encourage bullying behavior.

Ask.fm: A social site that lets kids ask questions and answer those posted by other users -- sometimes anonymously.

Why it's popular: Although there are some friendly interactions on Ask.fm -- Q&As about favorite foods or crushes, for example -- there are lots of mean comments and some creepy sexual posts. This iffy content is part of the site's appeal for teens.

What parents need to know:

- Bullying is a concern. The British news website MailOnline reported that the site has been linked to the suicides of several teens. **Talk to your teens about cyberbullying** and how anonymity can encourage mean behavior.
- Anonymous answers are optional. Users can decide whether to allow anonymous posts and can remove their answers from streaming to decrease their profile's visibility. If teens do use the site, they'd be best turning off anonymous answers and keeping themselves out of the live stream.
- Q&As can appear on *Facebook*. Syncing with *Facebook* means that a much wider audience can see the Q&A posters' behavior.

Kik Messenger: As with other messaging apps, Kik lets you send texts, pictures, and video. But it also offers lots of other mini-apps that let you do everything from exchange virtual greeting cards to chat with strangers. Users don't have to reveal real names, so there's a layer of anonymity.

Why it's popular: There's much more to *Kik* than meets the eye: You can send unlimited messages without depleting your texting limit; you can see whether someone has read your message; you can send individual or group messages; you can surf the Web from inside the app itself; and you can access tons of other content from within the app.

What parents need to know:

- It's easy to send messages to a group or all users if you're not savvy about settings, so teens might post things to everyone that they only mean to share with friends. Make sure they know how to navigate the settings and block people.
- It's possible to have anonymous contact with strangers. Talk to your teen about what information they shouldn't share, and encourage them to block people they don't know. *Kik* employs "bots" (automated messages that look like they're from people but are actually a form of marketing), so if kids don't recognize a user or something seems off, tell them not to reply.
- Many of the internal apps are iffy because they're trying to sell something or promote products. Make sure kids know whether they're allowed to spend and that "promoted chats" are actually advertising.

Omegle: An anonymous chat client through which users discuss anything they'd like. Its conversations are filled with lewd language and references to sexual content, drugs and alcohol, and violence.

Why it's popular: Online chat rooms have been around for ages, as have the iffy and inappropriate conversations that happen in them. Though there are many misconceptions about "online predators," it's true that risky online relationships -- though rare -- more frequently evolve in chat rooms when teens willingly seek out or engage in sexual conversation.

What parents need to know:

- Users get paired up with strangers -- that's the whole premise of the app. The app has been implicated in cases of sexual predators of teens. And there's no registration required.
- This is *not* an app for kids and teens. *Omegle* is filled with people searching for sexual chat. Some prefer to do so live. Others offer links to porn websites.
- Language is a big issue. And since the chats are anonymous, they're often much more explicit than those with someone who can be identified.

Whisper: A social "confessional" app that allows users to post whatever's on their minds. Users type a confession, add a background image, and share it with the *Whisper* community. It's intended for users age 17 and older.

Why it's popular: There's something to be said about sharing one's innermost thoughts without repercussions, especially if those thoughts aren't socially acceptable: It's cathartic. For those who simply choose to browse, *Whisper* can be amusing, heartbreaking, troubling, and comforting all at once.

What parents need to know:

- The scenarios can be hard to stomach. Reading that a teacher has fantasies about his or her students or that someone's father is going to be released from jail and start a custody battle can weigh heavily on teens. Some confessions, however, are totally benign (and funny!).
- There's plenty of inappropriate content. All too often, Whispers are sexual. Some use *Whisper* to solicit others for sex (using the app's geo-location "nearby" feature). Strong language and drug and alcohol references also

are prevalent (for example, "My wife and I were both high on our wedding day" and "I dropped acid with my mom once").

- Whispers can go public. Entertainment news sites, such as BuzzFeed, are beginning to feature Whispers. The problem? When secrets -- including the embellished or fake ones -- become news, we may begin to find ourselves in tabloid territory.

Yik Yak: A geographically based anonymous-chat app that lets users send photos and texts to people near their location.

Why it's popular: Teens want to connect with people already in their communities, and *Yik Yak* delivers on that desire. They can reference teachers and other students, and it's likely that other users will know who they're talking about. Because it's anonymous, teens can feel free to be totally candid.

What parents need to know:

- *Yik Yak* has been at the heart of many controversies and news stories because people have used it to make violent threats against other people and institutions.
- For the most part, the culture is crass and rude; people don't often go on *Yik Yak* to make others feel good about themselves.
- If a teen posts that he's going to commit an act of violence, anonymity can fizzle quickly. The developers have to comply with law enforcement, so kids can get into real legal trouble if they vent what they feel are idle threats.

The best way to approach these apps with your kids? Talk to them about their online reputations -- not in terms of "getting caught" by teachers, college-admissions officers, or future employers but as a matter of being true to themselves. Acknowledge that, chances are, they'll come across extreme, inappropriate, or hurtful content online ... and that it's OK for them to ask you about it, especially if it upsets them. These kinds of conversations will be far from fleeting -- the benefits will last a lifetime.

Temporary Apps

Temporary apps allow people to send messages and images that self-destruct after a set time window. Teens can use these apps to more carefully manage their digital trails -- so long as they don't share things they wouldn't normally send otherwise.

Burn Note: A messaging app that erases messages after a set period of time. It's limited to text; users can't send pictures or video.

Why it's popular: Its text-only platform, plus its unique display system that reveals only one word at a time, make it feel more secretive than similar apps.

What parents need to know:

- It promises a complete delete. Kids may feel tempted to reveal more than they would otherwise, since *Burn Note*'s developers claim it deletes every copy of the message (except from screenshots, which they also try to prevent).
- Anyone can receive a Burn Note. If you don't have the app, you'll get a link to a *Burn Note* message. So even if your kid has no interest in reading supposedly super-secret messages, she could unwittingly get involved.
- It could encourage cyberbullying. Since there is no record that a conversation took place, kids might feel they can get away with disrespectful behavior.

Line: A multifaceted text, video, and voice-messaging app that also integrates social media elements such as games and group chats.

Why it's popular: Teens are drawn to *Line* not only because it's a bit of an all-in-one mobile hub but also because it offers a lot of teen-friendly elements, such as a selection of over 10,000 stickers and wacky emoticons, as well as Line Play, an avatar-based social network. The free texting and video calls don't hurt, either.

What parents need to know:

- *Line* includes a feature called "Hidden Chat," which is similar to *Snapchat's* disappearing messages but with a few more options. Users can choose how long they'd like their message to last before it vanishes: two seconds or up to a week. These messages also can include location information, pics, and video. Though *Line* states that its servers are secure, as with *Snapchat* you can't be too careful.
- In-app purchases are a big part of the *Line* experience: Want to use that set of super-cute cat emojis? It'll cost you. Paying for games and other features within *Line* can add up, and to keep communication free, the recipient also must be a *Line* user, meaning your friends have to sign up as well.
- *Line's* terms of use state that "minors" need parental permission before signing up, but there's no process in place to monitor or track that information.

Snapchat: A messaging app that lets users put a time limit on the pictures and videos they send before they disappear.

Why it's popular: *Snapchat's* creators intended the app's fleeting images to be a way for teens to share fun, light moments without the risk of having them go public. And that's what most teens use it for: sending goofy or embarrassing photos to one another. Teens may pay more attention to Snapchats that they receive, knowing they'll disappear in a matter of seconds.

What parents need to know:

- It's not true that Snapchats go away forever. Data is data: Whenever anything is sent online, it never truly goes away. (For example, the person on the receiving end can easily take a screenshot of the image before it disappears.) Snapchats can even be recovered -- unaffiliated third-party services such as Snapsaved (**which was recently hacked**) give users the chance to save any Snapchatted pic. Also, users can pay to view Snaps multiple times.
- **It can make sexting seem OK.** The seemingly risk-free messaging might encourage users to share pictures containing inappropriate content.