Parent Guide to TikTok



It's reported that TikTok is fast becoming a problem at school, with many children using the app inappropriately for their age. Luckily, TikTok **can be a child-friendly and positive experience** with **many benefits** if it is used responsibly, and it has some **great features to help parents** keep their children safe online. We are working with your children to help them learn how to be safe online through the school curriculum, but **parental involvement is crucial** for children to use social media responsibly. We've **compiled some advice** with the help of online safety experts to support you in helping your children to be safe online.

The dangers of irresponsible TikTok use

- In 2022, police linked **12 crimes a day** to TikTok, including death threats, violence, grooming, and child abuse. (The Mirror, 2022)
- TikTok's 'blackout' challenge was linked to the **deaths of 20 children** in the span of 18 months. (The Independent, 2022)
- Medical professionals analysing viral health advice videos on TikTok found that **83.7%** of videos showed **inaccurate and potentially damaging advice**. (Psychology Today, 2023)
- The NSPCC reported an **80% rise** in online grooming incidents over four years, with an average of **120 incidents per week** in 2021/2022. (NSPCC, 2022)
- The highest concentration of active users by age is in the **10 to 19** age group (**25%**). (The Social Shepherd, 2023)
- **64%** of children who use TikTok have experienced some form of cyberbullying. (Security.org, 2023)
- A UK study using test accounts to trial the TikTok algorithm found that self-harm and eating disorder content was **being pushed to teenage users within minutes** of expressing small amounts of interest in the topics. (The Guardian, 2022)

How does the TikTok algorithm work?

The primary way users of TikTok consume content is through their 'For You' page, which is an **endless stream of videos** recommended by the **TikTok algorithm**. If you have TikTok yourself, you must not assume that your child's TikTok experience will be anything like yours – everyone's 'For You' page will be **completely different**. From what we know about the algorithm, videos on your child's 'For You' page will be recommended to them based on the following factors:

- Accounts they follow.
- Hashtags they've clicked on or searched for.
- Videos they've previously watched.
- Terms that they've searched.
- Videos that are popular with other users of the same age they said they were when they signed up and who show similar viewing patterns to them.

What you should know about your child using TikTok

1 It's important to set up an account using their genuine age

TikTok has a **minimum user age of 13** – anyone under this age will have to lie about their age in order to use it, and research shows that children as young as eight are consistently using the app. If a child who is eight years old uses TikTok, the algorithm **will think they are 13** and show them content watched by other 13-year-olds. By the time they're actually 13, the algorithm will think they're 18 and **begin showing them adult content**. This age verification is there for a reason, and children under the age of 13 are **not a suitable age for TikTok**.

2 It's vital for children under 16 to have a private account

All TikTok accounts made for people who enter their age as 16+ are **set to public by default**, and having a public account under this age can **leave children vulnerable** to grooming, exploitation, and online bullying on a wide scale. With private accounts, children can decide who they allow to follow them and who can message them – this **instantly makes TikTok safer**.

3 Your child's digital footprint could follow them forever

From the moment they make their first post or send their first comment, they have **started their digital footprint**. A digital footprint is **public and permanent**, and there are ways for comments and posts to be found even once they're deleted by the poster. This can have an impact on your child's future. 1 in 10 universities have **rescinded offers** due to applicants' social media activity, and HR departments will do online searches on candidates and withdraw, or not make, job offers as a result of a **negative digital reputation**.

4 Sometimes harmful content slips through restrictions

TikTok has methods to filter certain content, such as content about suicide, sex and self-harm; however, its **users have invented ways to avoid these restrictions**, for example by using terms such as 'unalived' instead of 'killed', 'SA' instead of 'sexual assault', and 'corn' or the corn emoji instead of 'pornography'. Even without social media, there's always the risk your child will inadvertently come across content that is intended for those older than their age group, and being aware that your child **will likely encounter more mature themes** on the app, even with restrictions in place, can help you prepare to have conversations with them about what they've seen.

Should you ban your child from using TikTok?

It's **natural to panic** at the thought of the potential dangers associated with TikTok, and banning your child from using the app altogether might feel like the only way to assure their safety – but online safety experts think allowing children to have social media **when they are the appropriate age** is a good thing, and that banning it altogether could even do **more harm than good**.

Child Safety Online Expert and parent Jessica Chalmers says: "I believe that there are **benefits to TikTok**. TikTok isn't going anywhere, and children can still find a way to access it online, even if you take it off their phone. It's far more useful to **talk to your children about the potential risks**, what they are and what to do if they come across them, so that we can empower them. Our job is to make **our children resilient online**, and they can't learn to be resilient in an **increasingly digital world** if they avoid it altogether. **At the right age**, with support and in a very controlled fashion, it's beneficial for them to experience it, so we can **prepare them for adulthood**."

Setting up a child-friendly TikTok

Family pairing

This feature allows you to customise your safety settings and link their TikTok account to yours to set parental controls. The process will take roughly **15-20 minutes**, and it's a good idea to do it together with your child, explaining why you're setting the controls you're setting. You can set the following controls:

> **Daily screen time limit** – you can decide how long your child can spend on TikTok each day, and set this from your own account. This limit will apply to all of your child's devices.

> **Restricted mode** – you can put your child's TikTok on restricted mode to filter out content that might not be suitable for them.

> **Search** – you can decide whether or not your child can search for videos, hashtags or live videos on TikTok.

> **Discoverability** – you can decide whether your child's account is private or public. If they're under 16 it will be set to private as default.

> **Direct messages** – you can restrict who can private message your child. If your child is registered on TikTok as under 16, direct messaging will be turned off automatically.

> **Comments** – you can decide who can comment on your child's videos.

How to set up Family Pairing



1. In the TikTok app, tap **Profile** at the bottom.
2. Tap the **Menu** button at the top.
3. Tap **Settings and privacy**, then tap **Family Pairing**.
4. Tap **Parent or Teen**.
5. Follow the steps in the app to link accounts.
6. Update the controls as needed by following **steps 1 to 3** and following the steps in the app.

It's a good idea to **update your child's privacy settings** as they get older, and ensure they're not **unnecessarily restrictive**, as this can sometimes motivate children to create separate accounts without their parents' knowledge. When you make rules about social media use, it's important to explain **the reasons behind these rules**, and emphasise that they're necessary to **protect their safety**.

How to talk to your child about TikTok

The best way to do this is to **keep the conversation open**. Let your child know they can **always come to you** to talk about social media and that you're creating a **judgement-free zone** for them to speak freely about their concerns and their thoughts. It's best to **refrain from criticising social media too much**, as this could make your child feel as though they can't talk about it. You can tell them that social media is **very complex**, and that **it's okay if they make a mistake**, but the important thing is that they talk to you or another trusted adult about it. The NSPCC recommends making social media **part of a daily conversation**. Talking about it in a **neutral, casual manner** on a regular basis may help your child to feel more relaxed, and increases the likelihood they'll approach you about anything they've found upsetting or anything they have questions about. It can also help break down barriers to conversation with older teenagers who may be more resistant to serious, sit-down conversations about social media. Your child will learn about online safety at school, so it's a good idea to make sure you're aware of **when and what they're learning about** and provide the opportunity to ask any further questions they have.

Misinformation

A lot of information posted on TikTok simply **isn't true**, so it's important to teach your child to **think critically about what they see online**. You could show them how to use a **fact-checking website**, such as snopes.com, which fact checks and debunks a lot of content that goes viral online. You could also teach them them the **CRAP test**.

The CRAP test:

- **C** – *currency. When was the video posted? How recent is the information included?*
- **R** – *reliability. Does the video point to sources that back up the information? Do credible sources such as broadsheet newspapers or journal articles support what is being said?*
- **A** – *authority. Does the poster have qualifications or experience to back them up?*
- **P** – *purpose. Could the person be biased? Is what they're saying opinion or fact? Is there an ulterior motive, such as convincing you to buy something?*

TikTok Protests



Recently, there's been a surge of protests in schools, originating with ideas spread on TikTok. It's important to acknowledge that one of our fundamental rights in a democratic society is peaceful protest; however, you can remind your child that it isn't acceptable for them to hurt anyone, physically or verbally, or to damage property to advance their cause. It might help if you try to **encourage empathy for school staff**, reminding them that, while they might not always get everything right, their ultimate goal is to **keep children safe** and to **help them learn and develop**.

Conversation key points:

- *Protests in schools can be dangerous and can cause serious safety concerns, including you or your friends getting hurt.*
- *Protests like the ones on TikTok can lead to you being excluded from school or even arrested.*
- *Your opinion matters, but there are more respectful and productive ways to raise a concern. If you have an issue, you can tell your teacher, the student council, or even tell me so I can talk to the school.*

Cyberbullying



When talking to your child about online bullying, it's important to ask them **what they know about cyberbullying** and if they've ever seen any cyberbullying happening. The key is letting them know **you're there for them**, and that they can talk to you if someone's being unkind to them online.

It's important to **encourage empathy for everyone** to make sure your child treats everyone with kindness. No one wants to think their child is capable of bullying, but, sometimes, children **simply get carried away** and can bully other children even if it's out of their usual character. This can be for a number of reasons – for example, peer pressure, low self-esteem, past history of being bullied themselves, or simply a result of their still-developing ability to regulate their emotional responses when someone has done something they don't like.

You can read more information about how to talk to your child about online bullying here. It may also be important to bring up the issue of **discriminatory bullying** – click the following links to learn more about talking to your child about online racism, LGBTQ+ discrimination and misogyny.

Conversation key points:

- *If someone is being unkind to you online, tell me or another adult you trust as soon as possible. It's okay to tell on someone if they're bullying you.*
- *Even if you don't like someone, it's still not acceptable to be unkind to them online. Remember, everyone has their own struggles and you need to think about how you would feel if someone said unkind things to you.*
- *There are real-world consequences to your actions online – talk to me if you make a mistake and we'll make it right together.*

Harmful challenges



Many TikTok challenges are **completely harmless**; however, some can be very dangerous and **even deadly**. Making sure your child knows to avoid dangerous challenges is vital. It pays off to be careful when bringing up online challenges to your child. If you bring up a challenge that they haven't heard of, it might prompt them to **investigate it themselves**, and this could lead to the TikTok algorithm showing them a lot of videos of the challenge.

For challenges, it's especially important that you **keep an ongoing conversation open** about what your child sees online, so they know they can come to you if they have questions or concerns. If you hear them talking about a challenge you know is dangerous, you could tell them that **children have lost their lives** through participating in dangerous challenges, and that they should **question whether a challenge is safe** before they participate in it.

Conversation-starting questions:

- *What kinds of challenges have you seen on TikTok?*
- *Do you think there are some challenges that are dangerous?*
- *How would you find out if a challenge was safe to do?*
- *Do you stop and ask yourself before you do a challenge if you could get hurt?*

Grooming

One of the most vital lessons to teach your child about online safety is how to **recognise and stay safe from grooming**. This topic will be covered at school, but parents reiterating the message is crucial to ensure they fully understand the risk, and how to reduce it.

The best way to do this is by ensuring they understand the **five stages of grooming**. They are: **targeting**, **gaining access**, **developing trust**, **desensitising the child to sexual content and touch**, and **maintaining control.** You can find out more about the stages of grooming here.

Conversation key points:

- *Never accept follow requests from people you don't know – not everyone is who they say they are online.*
- *Never meet anyone you've met online in real life without me there.*
- *If an adult tries to be your friend online, sends you anything inappropriate, or talks about touching you – tell me immediately.*
- *Sometimes bad people try to trick you by giving you lots of attention and compliments.*

Other concerns to talk about

TikTok dances

TikTok dances are usually innocent and fun, and can be a great way for children to engage in their interests and show creativity with a **private account only followed by their friends**. There are some dances that trend online which are overtly sexual, or performed to age-inappropriate songs, and it's important to make your child aware when a dance is **not intended for someone their age**. When a child's account is public and they are engaging in dance trends, this can increase their risk of sexual exploitation and grooming.

TikTok 'glow up' trends

Users will show images of themselves before and after a change in their appearance, e.g. the change from when they were younger to now, or the difference before and after getting dressed up. The intention of the video is to show **how their appearance improves**, and can sometimes involve provocative posing and clothing. A lot of the time, these trends are intended for young adults, and when teens and pre-teens engage in them, this can put their safety at risk and can lead to bullying.

Coded trends

Users have developed ways to get around restrictions by talking in code. A common trend at the moment is the 'mascara trend', where users talk about the age they were when they first used mascara, and share opinions on their experiences with it. In this trend, **mascara is a metaphor for sex**, and it's a way for users to talk about their sexual experiences, and even share stories of sexual violence, without their videos **being taken down or blocked by the algorithm**.

While this trend is often used positively to spread awareness, some of the videos could be **too mature for young audiences**. It's important to question trends such as this, as using **coded language** is becoming increasingly popular as TikTok ups its restriction measures. It's beneficial to **reassure your child** that if they see something online that upsets them, they can always talk to **you or another trusted adult** about it.