

A Parent's Guide to
TIKTOK

axis

A Parent's Guide to **TIKTOK**

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For Gen Z, TikTok is the app to beat.

“There’s huge enticement to get famous, which could encourage kids to do things they wouldn’t normally do to get a larger audience.”—[Frannie Ucciferri, Common Sense Media](#)

[TikTok](#) (formerly Musical.ly) has rapidly gained popularity among teens and tweens since its launch in 2016. As “[a destination](#) for short-form mobile videos,” users upload videos of themselves lip-syncing, telling jokes, dancing, etc.

For parents of teens and tweens who use the app (or keep asking to), it’s helpful to know what it is, its pitfalls and dangers, and how to talk to them about it in order to help them pursue abundant life in every area of their lives.

What is it? How popular is it?

To fully understand TikTok and its appeal, we need to go back to its origins: Musical.ly. Launched in the U.S. in 2014, Musical.ly was a mobile app for making 15-second lip-syncing videos that quickly grew in popularity to [200 million registered users](#). It even partnered with NBC for the 2018 Winter Olympics to give its users special behind-the-scenes footage. Within the first weekend of the Olympics, [Musical.ly had produced over 10 million engagements](#).



It was reminiscent of the now-defunct Vine (made somewhat of a comeback with [Byte](#)), a social media platform where users could share six-second-long videos (which could be amusing and clever and led to fame for a number of Viners, one notable example being [pop star Shawn Mendes](#)). Because of this, Musical.ly filled a hole for many Viners, as well as offered some new features.

[According to The Wall Street Journal](#) (paywall), “Musical.ly’s great innovation was making the video *selfie* a thing.” The videos could be up to 15 seconds long, and users were able to add music to them, choosing from numerous songs in the app’s database or from their own libraries. It was easy for users to creatively edit the videos by adding various effects. They could then share their creations either publicly or privately.

Musical.ly gave rise to quite a few teen stars in its own right. Famous users include [Baby Ariel](#), Jacob Sartorius, and twins [Lena and Lisa Mantler](#). But all of that ended when ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of TikTok (aka “Douyin” in China) that [purchased Musical.ly](#) in November 2017, decided to absorb Musical.ly into TikTok [on Aug. 2, 2018](#). The Musical.ly app was no more, and users’ accounts were migrated over to the highly similar TikTok app.

Now that it’s been combined with Musical.ly’s existing user base, ByteDance claims it has [800 million active users in 155 countries](#) (as of April, 2020). Many wondered if the merge would turn off Musical.ly lovers, but the data seems to show the opposite. In the iOS app store, it maintains a 4.8 out of 5 stars rating, with over [33 million downloads](#). It’s been downloaded over [1.5 billion times](#) on the App Store and Google Play, and was the third most-downloaded app in [Q3 of 2019](#) across both Android and Apple devices in the U.S.

TikTok’s requirements limit use of the app to anyone 13 and older, though there’s [plenty of evidence](#) that many Musical.ly users were quite young (9 years old or even younger; see image), so it’s probably true that TikTok has similar demographics. And while there’s plenty of anecdotal evidence to support claims that its [main user base is 13- to 18-years-old](#), specific statistics are hard to find.



How does it work?

TikTok’s [main features](#) (which will all be discussed more below) are:

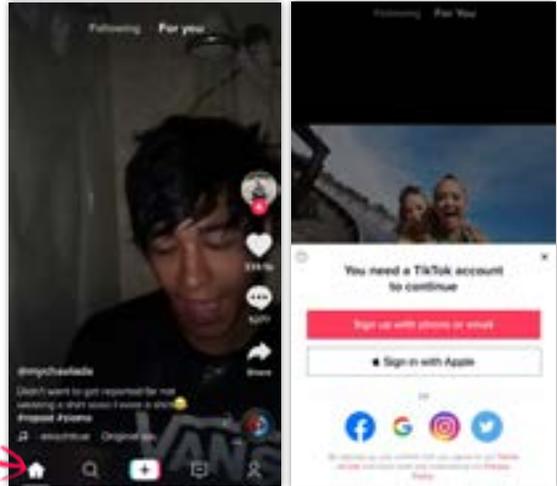
- **Video Creation:** Create, edit, and post videos.
- **Effects:** Apply filters and other Snapchat-like effects to videos.
- **Messaging:** Have text-message-style conversations with others.
- **Video Viewing:** Watch others’ videos, and like, comment on, or share them.
- **Profile Viewing:** Like Instagram, users can view others’ profiles, which consist of a profile pic, following/follower stats, and a feed of their posts.
- **Livestreaming:** Streaming video in real-time.

A lot of teens use TikTok to post videos of themselves lip-syncing and/or dancing to

their favorite songs (that's how [Baby Ariel](#) got started). Some sing or play instruments along with another song. Some create comedic skits, while others make DIY videos with music as a background track. Many make videos and duets to participate in a trend or meme. Check out [this list](#) of all the things found on TikTok.

What Happens When I Download TikTok?

When we downloaded the app, it opened with a screen to either accept or decline their Terms of Service. Once we accepted, it immediately opened with the **Home** feed of videos from real users (first image), over which were tips for how to use the interface. We did not have to create an account or profile to begin viewing videos. However, in order to follow others or create our own videos, it prompted us to sign up using a phone number, email address, Apple ID, or a Facebook/Google/Twitter/Instagram account (second image).



What Happens When I Create An Account?

After choosing how you want to sign up, it will ask for your birthday (which isn't ever shown to others), then ask you to create a password, after which it verifies that you're not a bot. It will also prompt you to find Facebook friends who are on TikTok, though you can skip this option.

Once your account is created, you can now follow other accounts, have direct message conversations with other users, customize your profile, and post videos.

Be aware that upon first signing up, an account is public by default. We got a handful of new followers just from posting one video with no hashtags. Also note that, once made public, you cannot delete videos from TikTok's servers. If you publish videos as public and then make your account private, [those videos won't be deleted](#) if you uninstall the app.

How do you create a video?

Tap on the plus sign in the middle of the bottom of the screen to create a video (you'll have to enable access to the microphone and the camera to do so). You can choose music for the video right off the bat by tapping "Sounds" at the top middle of the screen, which will bring up the music library sorted by themes (image). There's also the option to shoot a video first and add music afterward.



Options when posting (mainly located on right side of screen):



Toggle between the front-facing camera and the back camera.



Choose different recording speeds.



"Beauty," which removes wrinkles, shininess, redness, freckles, etc.



Instagram-esque filters.



Record hands free.



Turn the flash on or off.



Snapchat-esque effects.



Upload photo/video from camera roll ([videos can be no longer than 60 seconds](#)).



Photo templates (choose between different pre-made templates and upload your own photos.)

At the bottom of the screen, you can toggle between 15-second and 60-second videos. To record, one simply holds their thumb on the button. By releasing, it will stop shooting and allow you to edit that "segment," then continue shooting more segments or post it. One can post a video publicly or privately, as well as share to other social media platforms that have already been connected to TikTok or choose to save it as a Draft. Check out the "[Using TikTok](#)" category on their website for more detailed descriptions

of all of its features.

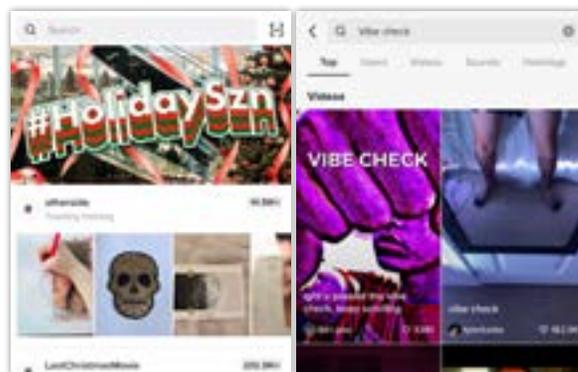
What's in the Home feed?

As mentioned above, the Home feed (AKA the “For You page” or fyp) is the default tab that appears any time you open the app. It's located in the bottom left corner and shows videos posted by the accounts you're following (“Following”), as well as videos based on what you have previously liked (“For You”). This screen is a good place to see the accounts/videos your child views when they use the app.

How do I search for specific accounts/videos?

Immediately to the right of the Home feed is the Discover tab. By tapping on that, you'll see a new screen (first image) that has a search bar across the top, under which is an automatically scrolling carousel of featured or trending accounts and hashtags. Beneath that, it lists trending hashtags with accompanying videos under each one. These hashtags update frequently and encourage musers to post videos that have a particular theme, such as #GlowUps or #VibeCheck.

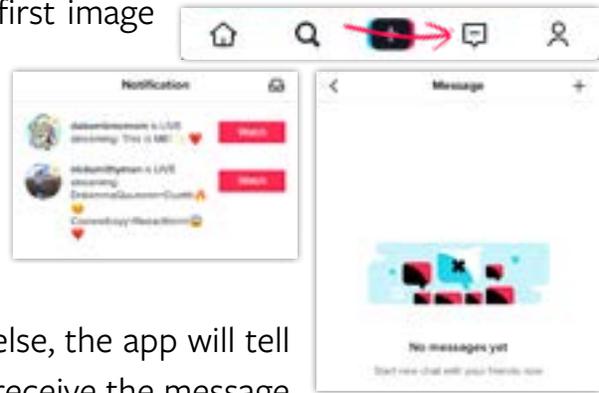
Search results can be filtered by **Top**, **Users**, **Videos**, **Sounds**, or **Hashtags**. Simply by selecting one of these categories, the app will populate with what's trending in that category before you ever type anything (second image).



Where are Direct Messages?

You can access TikTok's direct message system via the tab second from the right that looks like a chat bubble. This is where you access notifications (like how many people

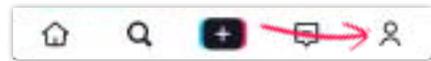
have liked your video or, as shown in the first image below, when someone is livestreaming) and Direct Messages. After tapping on the tab, you'll see an icon that looks like a paper airplane in the top right corner. That's where users can speak privately with each other.



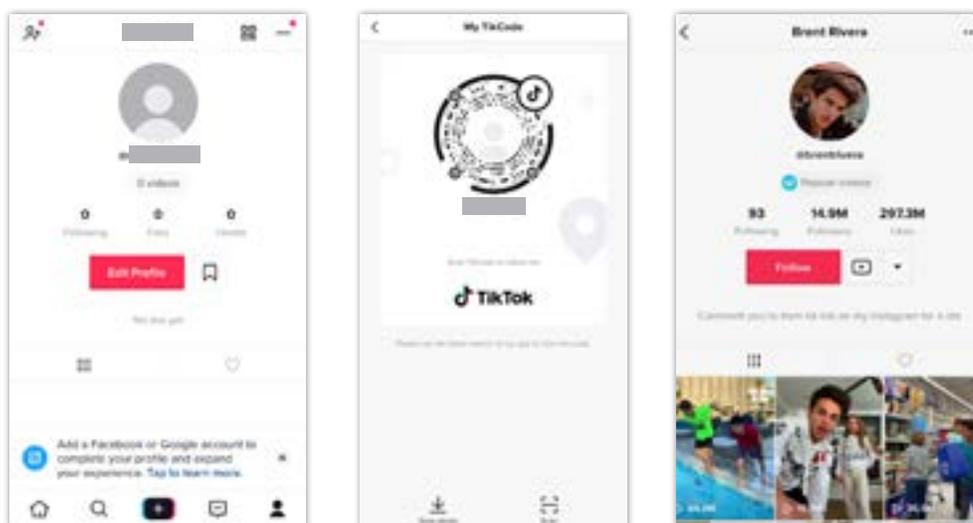
If you send a direct message to someone else, the app will tell you that there is a possibility they will not receive the message because of their privacy preferences. **If your account is public, you can receive messages from anyone**, which is obviously dangerous.

What should I know about Profiles?

You can access your profile at the bottom right corner of the app, and there are many options for customizing a profile (left image below). By tapping “Edit Profile,” you can add a picture, a video, a bio, and links to your Instagram and YouTube accounts. You can also share your profile on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and access your TikTokCode (middle image) to make it easier for others to find your profile.

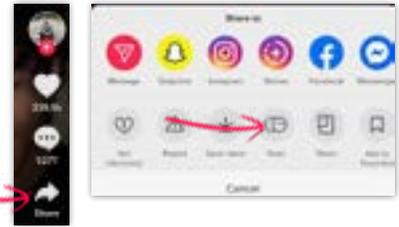


In others' profiles, you can see every video they have posted, as well as who they're following, who their “fans” are, and how many likes they've received (right image).



What's a duet?

This feature allows users to collaborate on a video. Users tap the **Share** button (first image) on any video, then tap on **Duet** (second image). This will bring up a screen with the original video on one side, and a space for the second user to create their corresponding video. Whatever music is in the first video is the music that will be on the duet. If users want to plan a duet ahead of time, they'll use Direct Messages to coordinate.



Can users livestream?

Yes and no. When we first signed up, we had two notifications about accounts that were currently livestreaming—that is, users who were streaming videos in real time for other users to watch, like, comment on, and send emojis to. But the feature seemed nonexistent within the interface, so after some digging, we discovered that the feature only becomes available once a user [has reached 1k fans](#), and they need to be at least 16 to livestream. However, viewing comments on YouTube tutorials for how to go live on TikTok reveals that the feature seems to randomly show up on different accounts. Some reported having the ability to go live despite having very few fans, while others with many fans complained that the feature did not appear for them. It remains to be seen if the company will make this more widely available or tighten down on restrictions.

Whether or not an account has the ability to livestream, it always has the ability to view others' livestreams. When watching a livestream, you not only view the video, but you also see emojis and comments appear on the screen as they're sent.

Users livestream for various purposes. Many users use their time to feature their fans on the stream in exchange for the “love” they show, i.e., follows, likes, and emojis.

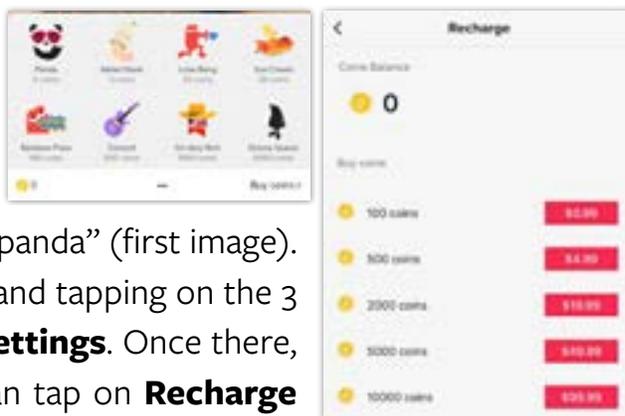
We saw one user showing off his drumming skills and another was doing a Q&A session. One account was livestreaming a photoshoot in a mansion. Several seemed to be active vloggers (video bloggers), and they were using TikTok to promote their Instagram and YouTube channels.

Several characteristics that stood out to us about TikTok’s livestreams were:

1. We had instant access to anyone anywhere in the world. We saw multiple livestreams in foreign languages, such as German or Spanish.
2. People seemed more than willing to spend money to send emojis to their favorite TikTokers.
3. It was easy to run across inappropriate content.
4. Many users (mainly those that the livestreamers were thanking and featuring in their feeds) looked like they were eight or nine years old.

Why is my kid asking to spend money on it?

You’re probably familiar with sending emojis in a text message or email. On TikTok, users can send emojis to other users, but they’re not free. They include things like “love bang,” “Italian hand,” and “panda” (first image). You pay for them by going to your profile and tapping on the 3 dots in the upper right corner to access **Settings**. Once there, tap on **Balance**. From this screen, you can tap on **Recharge** (second image; also accessible via the emojis screen at the bottom of a livestream) to purchase coins, which range in price from \$0.99 for 100 coins to \$99.99 for 10,000. The emojis themselves vary in price, with the most expensive ones currently being “I’m very rich” (1,000 coins or \$10) and “drama queen” (5,000 coins or \$50).



In one livestream, a fan who gave an “I’m very rich” emoji was given two bonus entries in a raffle in exchange. In other cases, users who were livestreaming would at least call out and thank the followers who gave generously.

Are there parental controls?

As long as a user has access to their account, they can make their account public, direct

message anyone, and view any videos. But TikTok does offer [Family Pairing](#), which allows parents to remotely disable DMs, set time limits, and enable content restrictions, rather than having to do everything from their kids' devices. The catch: Parents must have their own TikTok accounts (boosting TikTok's numbers), and their kids must allow them to link the accounts to each other (a privilege they can revoke at any time). But it's worth being on any app your children are on anyway in order to keep an eye on things and understand what they're experiencing. If you have kids on the app, make sure to enable the feature right away.

TikTok also offers a feature called **Digital Wellbeing** (image), which is accessed via **Settings**. It offers a **Restricted Mode** (which uses an algorithm to attempt to limit videos that may not be appropriate for all audiences) and **Screen Time Management** (no more than 2 hours on the app per day). Both of these are protected by a passcode (different from the account password), meaning a parent can set the passcode and not give it to the child.



However, because the app doesn't make you log in every time you open the app, it's possible for a parent to pick the Digital Wellbeing passcode (which is required to be reset every 30 days) and the account password, then not tell the child what it is. That does mean that a parent would have to enter the password for the child any time the app asks for it, but because users are required to enter the current password in order to reset the password, it would limit some functionality.



A caveat, though: If a child gets annoyed by this and hasn't really built up their account, they can easily just log out of the account and create a new one without the parents knowing. This is why it's important to not simply put strict boundaries on a phone without talking about them first. We highly recommend our [Parent's Guide to Smartphones](#), [Parent's Guide to iOS](#), [Parent's Guide to Android](#), and [Parent's Guide to Internet Filtering & Monitoring](#) for more on this perspective.

Why do kids love it?

One reason why teens and preteens like TikTok is the chance to get famous or, at the very least, to get other people's attention. It's also worth mentioning that users do get money when fans give them emojis, and some users were [reportedly earning \\$25,000 per month](#) through brand partnerships and gifts (emojis). So some teens might be enticed by being able to turn making fun videos into a job, rather than having to go to college and/or get a "real" job someday. For example, mega-famous TikToker and YouTuber Emma Chamberlain [doesn't plan to go to college](#) because she's already accomplished so much simply through her social media presence: she's an entrepreneur, content creator, and podcast host, to name a few of her job titles.

Predictably, part of the allure of TikTok is peer pressure. A lot of kids want to be on the app because their friends are on it and because they want to watch popular TikTok personalities. They don't want to be the only one who doesn't know what everyone's talking about.

Also, teenagers nowadays seem to enjoy watching people do activities online. An example of this would be YouTube star PewDiePie, who gained a massive following by posting videos of himself playing video games (which is also a type of video found on TikTok).

The best way to find out why your kids use (or want to use) TikTok is to simply ask them. That will help you to best understand the underlying drives and needs it fulfills for them, as well as how to plan conversations about the app.

What are its dangers?

The primary dangers involved with TikTok have to do with how easy it is to view mature content, how easy it can be to connect with online predators, and the potential for cyberbullying.

We don't want to be fearmongers, but we do think it's important to mention some of the harm people have experienced through Musical.ly and now TikTok. [One dad in Idaho Falls](#) caught his 11-year-old daughter sending pictures of herself in her underwear

to men who had been asking her for inappropriate videos. Another 11-year-old girl [received rape threats](#) and other sexually graphic messages. In her case, her account was private, and she got those messages after accepting a request from a stranger who she thought was someone she knew. Perhaps saddest of all is the story of a [10-year-girl in Aurora, CO](#) who committed suicide after someone recorded a fight she was in at school and posted it on Musical.ly.

These are horror stories that describe some worst-case scenarios that have happened to children using the app. But what was our experience with TikTok? The majority of the videos we saw could be described as “fluff.” Most weren’t offensive, nor were they particularly clever. They were videos of kids lip syncing to songs or acting out scenes and trying to be funny. Something that seems clear is that many of the people using TikTok want attention and validation.



So while TikTok won’t allow certain searches, such as for “sex” or “porn,” one of the first accounts that was **recommended** to us as soon as we signed up was highly inappropriate.

We also saw a girl who was livestreaming and swearing at her users. This consisted of her using the f-word every few comments, as did some of the people commenting in the chat. Other comments to her were “she is bi” and “do u like both genders,” to which she responded derisively, “There’s more than one gender.”

One particularly disturbing trend is the [“boyfriend porn check,”](#) (*watch at your own discretion*) most popular in February and March of 2020. Here’s how it works: The girl plays a tune that’s used in porn videos (each TikTok uses the same tune), and the idea is that if your boyfriend smiles at the song, he watches porn. And of course, this is all filmed for a “funny” video and posted to TikTok for the whole world to see. Another popular trend from March and April of 2020 is the [“surprising my boyfriend naked”](#) challenge (*watch at your own discretion*), in which girls record their boyfriend’s (or husband’s) reaction to their naked bodies. The videos never actually show any nudity, but the towel dropping and reaction reveals enough for the imagination.

The takeaway here is that, though trends like the “boyfriend porn check” and “surprising my boyfriend naked” will fade in popularity (at least until next year), other trends will

happen, and it's impossible to screen them all or keep young social media users from seeing them, making regular conversations about TikTok even more necessary.

It's impossible to mention all the things that might be considered dangerous. **But know that the majority of the content we saw was not graphic.** We encountered plenty of videos that were innocuous, many that were boring, and several that showed some talent. But the graphic content we did stumble on (not to mention all of the songs that are available with explicit lyrics) was pretty easy to find.

What's the app's position on mature content?

Among other things, TikTok's [Community Guidelines](#) prohibit obscene, pornographic, and abusive content. But similar to platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, TikTok relies on its users to regulate and report any inappropriate content they find, meaning there is always some out there.

To be fair to the app's creators, [TikTok states](#) that it is not intended for kids under the age of 13 and strongly encourages parents to be proactive about their children's use of the app: "More generally, we encourage you to take an active role in your teenager's online experience overall. Start the conversation early about internet safety, online privacy, and the options available to them. Your guidance can be invaluable!" The site also lists several resources to help parents encourage their teens to use the app wisely.

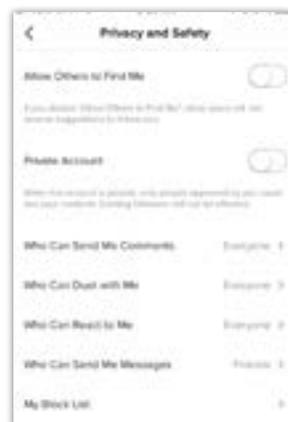
While it's sad and shocking to see so many young children on TikTok, parents do bear the burden of responsibility for allowing their kids to be on the app. But at the same time, it's hard not to wonder why the app's creators aren't more vigilant about enforcing their own rules.

What can I do to protect my kids?

So what can we actually do to protect our kids if they're on TikTok? We can:

- Make their accounts private.
- Make sure they don't accept requests from anyone they don't know,
- Block certain accounts if needed.
- [Report inappropriate content](#) immediately.

- Share their accounts with them (that means we need the app too!).
- Utilize the features available through Family Sharing and Digital Wellbeing.
- Have conversations with them about online safety, identity, worth, value, etc.
- Continue having conversations with them about online safety and their use of TikTok.



You’ll notice that these measures only go so far. The girl we mentioned earlier who saw sexually explicit content thought she was accepting a follow request from someone she knew. And a lot of these steps are ones you would take **after** your child has already encountered explicit content. [This mom](#) recounts some of the gut-wrenching things she saw on the app and even goes as far as to say that porn is not the worst thing on it.

As with anything, it’s up to you to take into account your children’s ages, personalities, and maturity levels when deciding whether or not they can handle TikTok. Because of the easy access to mature content, we recommend that parents don’t allow children under age 13 to use the app, and it might even be better to wait until they’re older (CommonSense Media recommends 16 years old).

See the final page of this PDF for some suggestions for questions to ask your kids if you’re considering allowing them to use TikTok, as well as if you are already allowing them to use it.

One Last Thing . . .

We found [this suggestion](#) given by mom Anastasia Basil (the one who thinks porn isn’t the worst thing on the app) an interesting idea worth considering: We parents tell our children that if they stay off all social media—yes, ALL social media; so no Snapchat, Kik, Tinder, Instagram, TikTok, Amino, Yubo, and so on—until they’re 16, they will each get a check for \$1,600 to spend *however* they want. Crazy, but also fascinating. We reward our kids for so many other achievements, so why not, as Basil says, reward them for “winning at peer pressure”? Or, at the very least, let that idea inspire us to come up with more creative ways of helping our kids have healthy relationships with their phones and social media, rather than simply being the “evil” parents who always say no to the things that seem so important to them.

Final thoughts

It's helpful to remember that TikTok is a product of two good desires God gave us: to create and to be in community—and it actually is pretty fun to make TikTok videos.

Besides the adult content on the app, the main complication is that there's a huge pull toward wanting to get attention in the form of followers, comments, and likes. Growing your fanbase is much easier to do when your account is public than when it is private. And a public account comes with a lot of dangers, especially for children. As Basil puts it:

If your child does not maintain an online self, chances are her social circle is small—friends from school, neighbors, family. If she has a rough day at school, a bell sets her free each afternoon. The jerks who taunted her at lunch aren't coming home with her for the night. She has space to think, to be with you, to read, to hug her dog, to recover, to get brave. Online, there is no school bell, there is no escape; she exists globally, and so do her mistakes. The ridicule is permanent.

If you decide to let your kids use TikTok, have consistent conversations with them about it. Make sure they're educated on the dangers of connecting with strangers online and that they have accountability.

And don't forget to pray, which is always the most important step you can take and the easiest one to neglect. You can't control your teens or protect them from every peril, but God will always know what's going on with them. Rely on Him first and foremost.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [Parent's Guide to Smartphones](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Internet Filtering & Monitoring](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Social Media](#)
- [Social Media Video Kit](#)

- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [“For Parents,”](#) TikTok
- [“TikTok Parental Guide,”](#) TikTok
- [“TikTok’s Top 10 Tips for Parents,”](#) TikTok
- [“What Is TikTok? And Is It Safe? A Guide for Clueless Parents,”](#) NBC News
- [“A Guide to TikTok for Anyone Who Isn’t a Teen,”](#) Slate
- [“TikTok/Musical.ly Guide,”](#) Stay Hippi
- [“How to Record a Music Video with TikTok,”](#) WikiHow (has screenshots)
- [“More younger members of Generation Z use TikTok than Facebook,”](#) Axios
- [“Dad warns of popular app after discovering disturbing messages sent to 7-year-old,”](#) WGN TV
- [“Ten-year-old schoolgirls traumatised after vile paedophile ‘hijacked their group gathering on popular Musical.ly video app,’”](#) *The Daily Mail*
- [“The Facts about Online Predators Every Parent Should Know,”](#) CommonSense Media
- [“Is the TikTok \(formerly Musical.ly\) App Safe? A Complete App Profile for Parents,”](#) Protect Young Eyes

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Recap

- TikTok is quickly growing in popularity with tweens and teens.
- It's fun and quirky because users make 15-second or 60-second videos, have the ability to add music, text, and filters, and are able to create "duets" with other TikTokers.
- There are limited parental controls available through Family Sharing and Digital Wellbeing, but nothing beats constant parental awareness and monitoring.
- As with most other social media apps, it's possible (and easy) for complete strangers to contact users, and there have been occurrences of predators on the platform.
- Many challenges originate on TikTok, and they can be anywhere from ridiculous and fun to graphic or even dangerous.
- We never recommend for anyone under the age of 13 to get on TikTok or any other social media platform because their terms require users to be 13 or older.
- Users can spend money on the app by purchasing coins to send emoji gifts to other users.
- If you let your kids get it, have regular conversations about the app, how it's affecting them, things they've seen, amount of time spent, and more.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

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Discussion Questions

Before Getting TikTok

- Why do you want to use TikTok? What do you plan to do on the app?
- How do your friends use TikTok?
- What are ways you can use the app creatively?
- Do you think the app will help you have better community? Why or why not?
- Do you know what the dangers of using TikTok are?
- How are you going to protect yourself while using the app?
- How are you going to keep yourself accountable for how you use it?
- Do you think it's worth continuing to use TikTok if you accidentally run across graphic content? Why or why not?
- Why do you think people are willing to spend a good chunk of money sending emojis to strangers? Would you do this yourself?

After Getting TikTok

- What has stood out to you about TikTok since you started using it?
- Do you think most people on the app are using it creatively and for good purposes? What do you think motivates other people to use TikTok?
- Have you run across any mature/explicit content?
- Do you think that TikTok is deepening your community or isolating you?
- What do you think about how much time you're spending on TikTok?
- How do you think TikTok is affecting, both positively and negatively? How can I help you better manage the negative effects?
- What would have to happen for you to decide not to be on the app? Will you tell me right away if that scenario occurs?
- What do you think about how hard others are trying to gain followers and views? Do you feel this desire? What do you think about that desire?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!