The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Social Media

Part 2 in a series on Social Media and Your Child

A Guide to Messaging Apps

Messaging applications (messaging apps) are phone or computer applications that allow individuals to communicate globally via text, video and photos. Messaging apps can be useful and fun, and can provide positive avenues for students to communicate with their peers. Unfortunately, abuse of apps by strangers, and even by your child, can provide a platform from which potentially dangerous situations can arise, e.g., cyberbullying and sexting. According to Net Nanny, "dangerous messaging apps usually have a few features in common that are clear indicators for parents that they are not safe for kids." Before your children use an app, you need to look for these features to determine if it is safe and appropriate for their use. These features are:

1. **Anonymous messaging** Many apps allow for individuals to message one another without identifying themselves. With anonymous communication, identifying information can be concealed, and this can lead your child to becoming a victim of individuals with unsafe motives. In addition, your child may develop a false sense of security and engage in activities that she would not consider if she thought she could be identified, such as cyber-bullying, posting inappropriate pictures, and communicating with strangers. The anonymity of certain sites can leave students vulnerable to adults with questionable motives, and can also contribute to personal information being easily accessible to adults and/or expose children to harmful content.

2. **Ability to chat with strangers** Our children by nature are impressionable and trusting. While many apps require age identification, it is not uncommon for adults to misrepresent their age, thus exposing your child to individuals who mean them harm.

3. **No filtration or monitoring devices** While no process is foolproof, apps that do not monitor use and content of their site pose the greatest danger to your child.

4. **No age restriction** Apps with no age restriction have the potential to expose your child to harm.

5. **Self-destructing messages, photos and videos** This relates to content that immediately disappears once it is viewed. While the images disappear, recipients can take a screen shot of the material and forward it to whomever they wish. This feature allows your child to have a false sense of security, and might encourage him to engage in behaviors that he would not consider if he thought that his message, photo or video could be connected to him.

As a parent it is important for you to be up to date and educated about the most recent apps and sites. Apps and sites change quickly, so it can be challenging to remain current and up to date. Review the features noted above to educate your child about the dangers of apps, and to help both you and your child determine if an app is safe for their use.

Listed below are some popular apps along with the feature that could make the app unsafe for your child:

- **Snapchat** - Self destructing feature
- **Ask.fm** - No filtration or moderation of content
- **Kik** - No profile verification so it leads to anonymous messaging
- **Whisper** - Anonymous messaging
- **TikTok** - While this app has an age restriction, there is no mechanism in place to verify ages of participants
- **WhatsApp** - Anonymous messaging

Resources:

Alvarez, Felicia (2014, June). 9 Most Dangerous Apps for Kids. Retrieved from Crosswalk.com.

A Complete Guide to Potentially Dangerous Apps All Parents Should Be Aware Of. Retrieved from familyeducation.com.

8 Most Dangerous Messaging Apps for Kids. Retrieved from netnanny.com.

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