

TikTok in Schools: A Safety Guide for Educators & Parents

This guide explores the impact TikTok can have on schools & students and offers some practical advice for dealing with this latest student craze.

Introduction

More likely than not, the majority of students at your school are regular users of TikTok. The daily use of the social video app has exploded over the past few years, resulting in schools struggling to deal with its impact on students and consequences for the school. Skipping school, broadcasting indecent videos in uniform and distraction from learning are just a few of the side-effects impacting schools.



What Exactly is TikTok?

This free social media platform is used for creating and watching short videos and sharing them with friends and strangers. Clips are often created using short grabs of music and can be enhanced by a range of tools such as filters, animation and special effects. The majority of videos produced are of young people lip-syncing and dancing to popular music but there are also talent videos, comedy skits, challenges and informational clips.

The Problem for Schools and Students

In its short lifespan, TikTok has already raised a few eyebrows. There have been several **concerns raised by governments, regulators, and the media**, which are a direct concern for schools and their students.

Like most social media apps, TikTok collects a huge amount of personal information about its users by demanding access to their phone's camera, microphone, contact list and location using GPS tracking.

Underage users

TikTok has a history of struggling to maintain its control over privacy of underage users.

TikTok has implemented stricter privacy rules for users aged 13-15. By default, accounts in this age group are set to private. This means that only approved followers can view their videos.[†]

Additionally, the setting to "suggest your account to others" is turned off by default for these users. For users under 16, TikTok reserves features like Direct Messaging for those aged 16 and older.[‡]

Because there is no way to verify an individual's birth date, many users simply lie about their age during the sign-up process. In July 2021, TikTok deleted just over seven million accounts that it suspected belonged to underage users. However, there was no indication that a regular audit of potentially underage users would be conducted.

Public relations

Having your school in the public spotlight as a result of inappropriate student behaviour is not something your, or any, school wishes to deal with.

Therefore, prevention through the approaches outlined in this guide will help ensure that your school is only in the public spotlight for the right reasons.

Privacy concerns

Privacy has long been a concern surrounding TikTok usage (and other social platforms, too). In addition to the nearly \$6 million TikTok paid to the FTC, Anne Longfield, the former Children's Commissioner for England, is reportedly suing TikTok for billions of dollars on behalf of children in the UK and EU.

The lawsuit alleges that TikTok continues to collect personal information from children, including phone numbers, location, and biometric data, without parental consent.

Each piece of data is stored somewhere; how secure that storage is, how long it remains collected (even after deleting an account), and how that data is used is rarely communicated in a clear and transparent way.

Explicit material

There have been several incidents of students uploading inappropriate material while identifiable in their school uniform. A few examples of this behaviour include imitating sex acts and miming to explicit or sexist songs.

[†]<https://www.lifehacker.com.au/2021/01/what-parents-need-to-know-about-tiktoks-latest-privacy-controls/>

[‡]<https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-au/furthering-our-safety-and-privacy-commitments-for-teens-tiktok>

The Problem for Schools and Students, Cont.

Predatory behaviour on TikTok

Privacy complications extend far beyond collecting user data from children; protection from child predators is also a crucial concern.

A BBC investigation found that underage users were exposed to hundreds of predatory messages from predatory strangers intent on grooming young users. Sextortion is also a major issue in Australia. The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) recorded an average of more than 100 reports of sextortion every month in Australia. This represents a significant increase compared to previous years.[†]

As a result, authorities around the world have conducted their own investigations in an effort to ensure TikTok is no longer a hospitable environment for predators. Additionally, many TikTok users have also taken a DIY approach to monitoring predatory behaviour on the app by collecting and sharing screenshots of sexual misconduct in an effort to warn others and alert authorities.

While TikTok's own reporting feature has often been criticised for its [lack of] efficacy, it's still important for educators, parents and students to be aware of it and to actively use it to report any inappropriate or distressing content.

Addiction and distractions in the search for fame

A social media app proving to be a distraction for students both during school and homework times is nothing new.

However, it is the extent to which TikTok has been able to take an addictive hold over students and the resulting behaviours that are particularly concerning. Many young people using the app are doing so in pursuit of becoming 'TikTok famous' (getting a large number of views on videos). TikTok even offers monetary incentives through their 'Creator Fund' for users to build an engaged audience on the platform.

TikTok provides a possibility for ordinary people to build a large audience and even make a substantial income through the app, which adds a legitimacy to this dream.

Data used to keep youth on the platform

Like many free-to-access social media platforms, TikTok is in the business of monopolising user time to make money. They use a number of clever strategies to maximise both the number of visits to the app and the duration of each visit.

One of the key strategies is the highly intuitive algorithm that is behind how videos are presented through a user's For You Page (FYP). The FYP presents an endless scroll of videos.

The videos presented through the FYP are heavily curated for each user based upon how they engage with content through the app, the profiles they interact with, and the behaviour of others within a similar demographic, amongst other things.

The user level curation, coupled with the endless scroll and short video duration, creates the perfect environment for that 'just one more video' mentality.

Cyberbullying

As the platform of choice for Gen-Zers, TikTok has become a hub for online bullying; body shaming is particularly prevalent on TikTok. This type of psychological abuse is harmful to young, impressionable minds whose early experiences will continue to shape their sense of self-worth, and can help to further perpetuate unhealthy societal norms from early on.

In March 2021, TikTok partnered with the Cyberbullying Research Center to help develop initiatives that prevent cyberbullying and harassment on the platform. New features designed to curb online bullying include:

- ✓ The ability to review comments before they appear alongside videos
- ✓ An AI-powered anti-bullying coach that flags potentially harmful content and gives the commenter the chance to re-think and edit their post
- ✓ A spam filter that removes comments with offensive language and keywords

[†]<https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/afp-and-austrac-target-offshore-sextortion-syndicates-preying-australian>



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Teodora Pavkovic
Lead psychologist and digital wellness expert at Linewize

How Schools Should Address TikTok Challenges

Schools are well placed to protect their students, staff, and property, and preserve the harmony within their community. Today, **social media dominates so much of our children's lives**, and because they spend the larger portion of their day in school, it's up to school administrators to ensure safety both on and offline.

Stay informed

Staff don't have to be active TikTok users to leverage the platform as an investigative and informative tool. Staff members should monitor the platform regularly: Pay attention to trending hashtags, popular challenges, and local content. This way, you can pinpoint potential problems long before they become a serious issue.

Monitor student safety

Teachers should monitor students in two key ways: via school technology as well as direct observation.

Part of staying informed means monitoring your students' devices and recognising red flags when it comes to online behaviours. In today's educational environment, 1:1 learning is common, and your staff needs to be equipped with the right tools to monitor students safely and effectively.

Many schools already have filtering and monitoring solutions in place to maintain compliance; however, filtering and monitoring are about much more than blocking violent and adult content.

Simply put: the right monitoring and filtering solutions can help educators intervene when it matters most.

Educate parents

Teachers are in a unique position to observe the development of social media trends within their schools in real time and should use that insight to help parents stay informed as well. Now more than ever, it's important for parents to understand how their kids are using social media, and the impact it has on their personal and academic lives.

Be aware of workarounds

As all school staff are aware, setting clear expectations is only a piece of the puzzle. If the rules you have set are not being consistently implemented, then your entire management approach is compromised. If you know that students are using mobile data to film TikTok videos in the school bathrooms during breaks (yes—we see A LOT of these pop up in our 'For You Page'), and this is against your school rules, make sure that staff follow the procedure you have in place to address the situation.



Provide Parents Empowering Education in Online Safety

TikTok isn't inherently a bad digital space for young people; many students have used TikTok to spread messages around social activism, break social barriers, and discuss important topics, like climate change.

There are two primary ways to support parents.

First, provide them with access to parental control tools. Second, provide them with education, resources and advice on how to help their children use social media and gaming technologies in more intentional, positive and responsible ways.

Stay informed

Younger teenagers, aged 13 and above, can still use the app safely, as long as it's scaffolded with proper adult supervision. When monitored and used correctly, students can have a fun—and even educational—experience on TikTok. However, combining at-home monitoring with conversation is essential.

“Using monitoring software alone doesn't amount to much more than surveillance,” cautions Teodora.

“When you add conversation to that—and lots of it—you create that vital dialogue around digital citizenship, healthy online habits, and social-emotional wellbeing.

“Parental controls and apps like Qustodio absolutely must be paired with conversations about why those filters are in place, and what kinds of behaviours on your child's part will gradually lead to a reduction in those filters and other limits.”

Be wary of user-generated content

Furthermore, it's important to understand how each individual user impacts the ebb and flow of TikTok trends.

According to Pavkovic, this is the greatest challenge when it comes to staying safe on social media platforms that are entirely made up of user-generated content.

“An important best practice to follow is not to continue the spread of any harmful user-generated content via social media,” Pavkovic adds.

“One of the biggest issues with TikTok's recent viral trend of school threats was that, in an attempt to caution and potentially protect others, users continued sharing the news, which only helped the trend go viral. TikTok's algorithm doesn't distinguish between users who are sharing content out of concern or curiosity and those who are doing so out of spite or malice. A share is a share in the online world.”

Educate Students

TikTok's bandwagon effect has made many students feel invincible; they falsely believe that they can participate in online challenges without facing consequences in real life, because if everyone else is doing it, no one will get in trouble. **This is what psychologists refer to as the “diffusion of responsibility” phenomenon.**

Equip students with knowledge

Educators should remind their students that this isn't the case and that, in wake of recent threats and challenges, administrators will be taking more serious actions against individuals who violate school rules. So, if TikTok and other social media channels aren't a priority for your school's staff right now, it would be best to reorient your position as soon as possible.

“I would strongly encourage schools to develop or update their policy around communicating with parents when there is evidence of students' problematic use of school-issued or personal devices,” says Pavkovic. “Schools need to establish a set of criteria and, ideally, designate one or more staff members to be in charge of communicating with parents regarding these sensitive topics. This could be a counsellor, a social-emotional learning coach or a student safety expert.”

Once you are done finalising your policies and code of conduct, communicate them via a school assembly, form room announcement, parent form and signature, and/or any other medium you deem appropriate, making sure that your parent community is in alignment with your expectations around student behaviour.

Embrace social media awareness

TikTok doesn't have to be the enemy, at home or inside the classroom. Teachers around the world have found ways of combating their own negative biases towards the platform, embracing it instead and incorporating it into their lesson plans.

As a part of your duty to “Stay Informed,” it's important for your teachers to educate themselves on how TikTok works and how young people are utilising it in their daily life. Talk to your students about the platform, and about what's happening on social media on a regular basis.

For instance, many teachers hold a “current events” discussion as a part of their curriculum; with technology, social media, and education being so intertwined in today's learning environment, staff should consider starting a dialogue around what's happening on social media today and how it impacts student lives and their wellbeing.

Best Practices for Safe Social Media Use

There is a huge volume of information out there on helping students use TikTok safely, and learning how to navigate different social media platforms **can be exhausting**.

The following is a summary of best practices for safe social media use, but it's important to consider how your students and wider community influence the way you communicate and implement these safety tips:

- Don't continue sharing harmful content on social media, even if to warn others
- Elevate your social media literacy by always questioning the source of any post or trend—especially on platforms with user-generated content
- Have a policy in place that instructs staff, parents and students on how to quickly and safely report potentially harmful social media content
- Communicate your policy clearly to students, staff, and parents
- Equip parents with tools to monitor their children, and resources to help guide and educate them
- Ensure your school's filtering and monitoring tools are up-to-date, and that they can safely and effectively monitor students' online behaviour
- Embrace social media awareness by incorporating social media conversation-starters into lesson plans and/or at-home discussions
- Talk to children about social media and give them the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns
- Teach your students about good digital citizenship and social responsibility

How Linewize Can Help Your School Manage TikTok

Remove the distraction from your school

Linewize School Manager can ensure every student is protected and their learning device is being used purely for learning purposes during school hours, no matter what network they are connected to or filter avoidance tactics they may employ (such as VPNs). And detailed reporting can help highlight harmful content spreading throughout the school or identify potentially dangerous student behaviour before it becomes a problem.

Keep your students focused in class

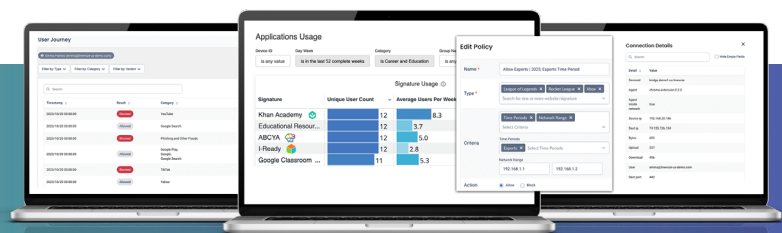
Linewize Connect allows teachers to keep their class focused with the ability to monitor student learning devices during classes and empower teachers to either block or unblock apps and websites depending on what they need to execute their lesson.

Educate and empower parents and families

Designed specifically to drive parental engagement, Linewize Community helps ensure parents are involved in their child's online activity, and empowers them to effectively manage cyber safety, including app use such as TikTok, social media and screen time. Your parents have access to tools to set firm boundaries around what their children can access online—and when they can access it—while allowing the flexibility that modern family life demands.

Discover how Linewize solves your school's cyber challenges.

Book a demo today





Linewize is a unique response to the challenge of today's connected learning environments, supporting the integration of technology, education and engagement to create cyber safe communities where students thrive.

Web: www.linewize.io
Email: sales@linewize.io

Qoria

Linewize is part of Qoria, a global technology company, dedicated to keeping children safe and well in their digital lives. We harness the power of connection to close the gaps that children fall through, and to seamlessly support them on all sides - at school, at home and everywhere in between.

Find out more
www.qoria.com