TikTok : What parents need to know

TikTok can be a fun, creative social media platform; but it's not without risks. Here's what parents should know.

Written by Taryn Wren, ICT Teacher and Online Safety Expert

Last modified Mar 14, 2023

TikTok is a free social media platform that allows users to create, share, and watch an endless stream of short-form videos online. It started life as Musical.ly before being bought, thoroughly overhauled, and rebranded as TikTok in 2018. With more than 1 billion active monthly users, it has grown to be the world's sixth most popular social media platform behind Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and WeChat.

TikTok's video content features almost anything, including dance challenges, lip-syncing, ASMR, life hacks, comedy skits, or viral trends, and although at first glance, the platform appears to be a fun, creative and highly entertaining social media outlet, it is certainly not without online safety risks, and inappropriate content is rife.

So, what is it about TikTok that young people love, how are they using it, and how can we make it safer for our teens?

What is the minimum age to use TikTok?

TikTok's terms of service prohibit users under 13 years of age from using the platform, and although there is an age-gate when an account is created, it isn't verified. Children who are underage need only enter a false birthdate to gain full access to the platform.

Those who reside in the US and register indicating they are under 13 years will receive a 'limited app experience' – TikTok for Younger Users. This version limits content and user interaction, hides comments, and disables personal information sharing; however, parents should note that it still features advertising, collects some user data (such as the device ID, videos watched, and time spent on the platform), and uses the information collected to curate the user's feed. The terms of service also state that users under 18 years of age must have consent from a parent or guardian to use the platform.

How is TikTok accessed?

Users can gain access to TikTok's content by downloading the app onto their iOS or Android devices, typing 'www.tiktok.com' into a web browser, or watching TikTok videos uploaded onto other social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

Users don't need an account to watch or search for videos on the platform but will need to create one if they want to interact with other users, view comments, share, create and post their own videos or build a following. Creating an account is as simple as entering a birth date (which isn't verified), providing a phone number or email address, and completing a bio to optimise the profile. Users can also sign up through their existing Facebook, Google or Twitter accounts; however, doing so will enable crossover information sharing between the platforms.

How is TikTok used?

Consumer or creator?
TikTok users fall into two categories: consumers (those who watch the videos but don't create and share content themselves) or creators (those who participate in creating and sharing videos); however, many are both. The short-form videos with their funny, entertaining or trending content are highly appealing to teens, and TikTok's built-in editing tools including filters, special effects, songs, and sound bites make it very easy to use. Depending on privacy settings (public or private), users can either choose to view videos and interact solely with their connections and those they are following, or with the broader TikTok community.
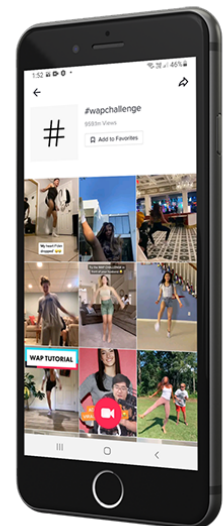
For You feed

TikTok's content can be found in several places. 'For You' (the platform's default feed) is an endless stream of videos especially curated by TikTok's algorithm to appeal to the user based on a highly-detailed analysis of their past platform habits, including videos they have watched, liked, or shared, and those they have indicated they are not interested in viewing. Users can help the algorithm learn what they like and don't like to see on their feed through the blocking options found in the 'not interested' menu based on specific videos, particular sounds, or creators. Conversely, liking and commenting on posts and videos that appeal will prompt the algorithm to provide more of the same.

Parent Tip: If you want to know what type of content your child has been viewing on TikTok, spend some time watching the videos that appear in their For You feed, which will provide you with an indication of the type of videos they have viewed or interacted with previously. If you would like a detailed list of your child's TikTok viewing history, please follow these steps:

1. *On your child's smartphone, open the TikTok app.*
2. *Select the three lines in the top right-hand corner, and then select Privacy.*
3. *Select Personalization and data.*
4. *Select Download your data.*
5. *Select Request data.*
6. *Select Download data to see the status of your request, which will be pending. Data retrieval usually takes 24 hours.*
7. *When the file is ready, select Download and you will be redirected to your browser.*
8. *Log in to and verify your TikTok account.*
9. *In the pop-up confirmation window select Download. The file will download in a zipped format.*
10. *Open the zipped file and choose the .txt file named Video Browsing History.*
11. *This list contains a date, time and link to every video watched. Copy and paste the link to view it in your browser.*
12. *This TikTok data file will remain active for four days, after which it will need to be requested again.*

Discover and Friends tabs
The 'Discover' tab helps users explore content by category. It groups videos shared on TikTok by hashtags corresponding to trends, challenges, or specific themes. Users can search for content by hashtag, sound, creator username or keyword. As of May 2022, TikTok began replacing the Discover tab with a Friends tab, displaying a feed of accounts that the user follows as well as other connection suggestions and content. Users can also use the search function to locate content relating to a specific category of interest.

Duet and stitch features
The TikTok and Stitch features enable people with public accounts to incorporate content created by other users into their own videos, promoting platform collaboration. Duets enables users to create a video that plays side by side with that of another user, as would happen if they were performing a duet in real life. The sound and effects of the original video are used and enhanced with additional sound and effects created by the added video.

TikTok Stitch enables users to incorporate a small portion of another person's video into their own. Original sound can be kept or the user can choose to create a voice-over.

TikTok LIVE
With TikTok LIVE, users can interact in real time; however, the 'going live' feature is only available for users over 16 years of age. Users who are 18 and over can send and receive gifts during a TikTok LIVE.

TikTok Now
TikTok Now is TikTok's answer to the popular app, BeReal. This new feature is still evolving and is currently available for use through the app in all regions or downloaded as a separate app in regions outside the US. Like BeReal., it aims to offer users a more authentic way to connect daily. At a random time each day, users are notified that it's 'Time to Now', and given a three-minute window to take a photo or 10-second video to share. TikTok Now utilises the device's front and back cameras to capture the user and their background to show what they are up to at that moment. Users have the option to share their Now with 'Friends' only (anyone they follow who follows them back) or 'Everyone' (all TikTok Now users within their region). For users aged between 13 and 15, commenting and reacting is limited to friends' posts only, and those under 18 can't share their Now on their Explore feed.

Monetising TikTok accounts

There are several ways users can monetise their TikTok account; however, before they begin, they need to meet a series of conditions. Firstly, they must be over 18 years of age and have a minimum of 10,000 followers. They also need to have had more than 1,000 video views and 3 posts or more in the 30 days prior. Finally, their account must be in good standing with no community guideline violations.

Useful TikTok slang

Parents often feel like their children are speaking a foreign language, and in some cases that's really true! Social media has helped create a whole new lexicon for young people, and some of the most popular terms used on Tik Tok are:

POV - Refers to a TikTok trend where the video depicts the creator's point of view of a particular situation.

CEO - Usually a compliment but can also be used sarcastically. It refers to a person who is one of the best at a certain thing.

asl - can either mean age, sex, location or a contraction of 'as hell'.

Accountant - A term that is often used for jobs that are hard to explain, for example, creators who make adult content may refer to themselves as an accountant.

Mid - Generally used as an insult to describe something that is mediocre or poor quality.

Moots - an abbreviation of 'mutuals' and used to describe a person you follow who follows you back.

W/L - winner or loser.

srs - Serious. When written with a forward slash, for example /srs, it increases the severity. Other examples include things like /pos (positive), /neg (negative, /s (sarcasm), and /g (genuine).

fake body - a term often used to avoid TikTok's anti-nudity policy.

/hj - Half joking. Usually used when the writer is mostly serious.

Are there any risks?

Like many social media platforms, there are a number of online risks associated with using TikTok; however, enabling privacy settings, installing parental controls and good parental supervision are key to managing these risks. Information on increasing the privacy settings on your child's TikTok profile, and how to make their account safer can be found under the 'How to make TikTok safer' heading below.

Privacy and predator risk

Young people aspiring to be like the platform's celebrities and become 'TikTok famous' (amass a large number of views and followers) will set their profile to 'public', enabling them to be discoverable by any user on the platform; however, doing so can pose a significant risk to their safety by making them contactable to anyone including strangers, and increasing their exposure to inappropriate content, sexually explicit comments and online bullying.

Like all social media platforms, if teens' accounts are not set up correctly, or if they are not selective with who they allow to follow them, they can be contacted by strangers, and there have been numerous reports of a predator presence on TikTok.

Parents should be aware that when a user signs up to create a TikTok account, the default privacy settings that apply are determined by the user's age. A user between 13 and 15 years will have their account set to private by default (the account can still be made public manually). However, those over the age of 15 will automatically have their account set to public when they sign up and will need to manually change the settings to private.

The availability of other privacy-impacting features, such as strangers being able to comment on posts, other users having the ability to download videos, and who is able to duet a user's videos are also influenced by age. Consequently, it is important that a child's correct birth year is used when the account is created to activate these safety features.

The availability of other privacy-impacting features, such as strangers being able to comment on posts, other users having the ability to download videos, and who is able to duet a user's videos are also influenced by age. Consequently, it is important that a child's correct birth year is used when the account is created to activate these safety features.

Depending on settings, even private accounts may be 'suggested' to strangers if they share a mutual connection, and despite the 'Suggest account' feature being toggled off, TikTok will continue to suggest a user's account to those they are following.

TikTok enables people that the user may know or be connected with on other platforms to find them on TikTok by automatically syncing their phone contacts or other social media accounts such as Facebook, depending on the information used when the account was set up. This creates a potential privacy risk.

Inappropriate content
Alongside the dance challenges and humorous skits, TikTok hosts a substantial amount of inappropriate (and potentially harmful) videos containing suggestive or sexual themes, profanity, violence, themes of self-harm, and extreme dieting, as well as dangerous challenges and drug references. Young users risk becoming desensitised to content of this nature with repeated exposure or taken down rabbit holes of content that is not healthy or beneficial to their social-emotional wellbeing. Although most users don't actively seek out these types of themes, they are often embedded within the videos and not always initially obvious.

Although not fool-proof, TikTok content is monitored; however, creators with videos that may contain inappropriate content are also highly adept at circumventing filters and other safeguards or preventing their videos from being flagged by using creative hashtags or unusual spelling so as not to arouse moderator censorship.

Dangerous or inappropriate challenges
The aim of most TikTok content creators is to increase their following and earn likes and comments on their posts, and this is often done by sensationalising their videos with dangerous stunts or other risky behaviour to attract views. The 'Skull Breaker' challenge, which went viral in early 2020, is one example that attracted international media attention after causing multiple hospitalizations and one reported death. Posing in sex positions, sharing their 'body count' (and no, this is not how many people they've killed), and dancing alongside a moving car are just some of the less than ideal trends that have done the rounds.

Problematic screen behaviours
By its very nature, TikTok is designed to be addictive. The personally curated feed ensures the content is appealing to each individual user and the short-form video format makes it incredibly easy to mindlessly scroll from one to the next. Statistics have shown that the average user spends 52 minutes per day on the platform (or just over one whole day each month); however, the time spent increases to a 90 minutes per day average for younger users. Studies have also shown that the short-form video format can decrease collective attention span and has an adverse effect on memory and mental health.

Additionally, excessive screen time of any kind can cause other health issues including eye strain, headaches and poor posture.

Online bullying

Online bullying within the comments section is rife on TikTok, particularly for creators who have their accounts set to public, exposing themselves to a greater pool of TikTok users (including strangers), rather than just their friends and followers. The anonymity given through online interaction often means that users feel no restraint when commenting on videos. Fairy comments (a comment that usually contains cute, positive emojis and starts off sounding nice, but ends with a sarcastic, inappropriate or nasty twist) are also popular on TikTok, particularly among Gen Z users. Fortunately, users can filter and block comments, enabling them to partly control what they see and who can interact with their account.

Online bullying is not just limited to the platform, however. Often, users will upload or share TikTok videos or create 'cringe compilations' for the purpose of ridicule on other social media platforms, such as YouTube

Data collection

After the platform was fined $5.7 million in 2019 for violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) by collecting data from users under 13 years of age, it made all profiles of users under 16 years private by default. Two of the main ways TikTok profits is by increasing its user numbers and through cultivated advertising; therefore, it's in its best interests to find out as much as possible about its users. Even without an account, the platform is able to collect at least some forms of data using cookies and other online tracking technology. Once an account is created, however, TikTok employs a vast array of data collection techniques enabling them to potentially form a scarily detailed personal profile of the user.

Aside from the information provided by the user at signup, the platform is able to determine the type of device a person is using, their IP address, location and the type of content they like (based on their search history, how long they 'hover', whether they interact or react with a particular video, and the type of content they create). From there, it can go further to determine such things as a user's likely ethnicity, religion, sexual persuasion, shopping habits and mental health. Mobile creators must give the app permission to access their device's camera and microphone. In the US, TikTok can also collect biometric information including voice and facial recognition.

Data collected by the platform can be forwarded on or sold to third parties without the user's permission and with no information provided about how the data will be used, creating a further privacy risk.

Are there any positives?

When installed and used safely and within reason, TikTok can provide a fun, entertaining, and creative platform for teens to enjoy and express themselves in a positive way. Much of TikTok's content features ordinary people, helping to make it more relatable and enabling users to feel better connected with others who are like-minded. The platform allows anyone to showcase their interests and talents, regardless of who they are or where they come from, and can be an excellent way for teens to try a new hobby or discover a hidden skill they didn't know they had. It also provides opportunities for those with particular expertise to impart their knowledge to a massive, diverse audience.

TikTok has taken some measures to help support user wellbeing by implementing stricter guidelines for videos with potentially serious mental health topics, by putting search interventions in place for common risk words. For example, should a user search for #suicide, they will be directed to an appropriate support resource rather than content relating to suicide. It has also created a Safety Centre guide to help users educate themselves about eating disorders. If you do find out that your child is struggling with any kind of mental health issue, it's important to seek out professional help from a trained mental health practitioner.

How can I make TikTok safer for my child?

Being involved in your child's account set up and actively monitoring their use of the platform is key to helping them maintain a safe, positive TikTok experience. Ensure your child's correct birth year is entered when their account is created to enable appropriate privacy settings. Additionally, you should install adequate parental controls on your child's device. For instructions on how to set an account to private, see here.

Family Pairing is TikTok's in-platform parental control tool. It provides parents with some control over managing their teen's daily screen time, search ability, whether their account can be discoverable to others, content restriction, direct messaging capability, content suggestions, and more. For detailed information on how Family Pairing works, and how to set it up on your teen's account, visit TikTok's user safety guide.

Ensure that your teen knows what to do and the resources available to them if they see something on the platform that makes them feel uncomfortable, or if someone on TikTok is bothering them. Detailed instructions for reporting a problem can be found in TikTok's safety support section.

Importantly, set clear boundaries in your family tech agreement regarding how your teen uses the app, and let them know that you are there to help and support them if they need it.

Learn how TikTok has made its platform safer.