Teens and Instagram: Practical steps parents can take to help teens navigate Instagram safely

By Carey van Vlaanderen , issued by ESET

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Instagram (IG) is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, particularly among teenagers. The photo-sharing app ranked third in terms of?preferred social networks among teenagers in the United States, second to Snapchat and TikTok.

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According to research from World Wide Worx in partnership with Ornico, there are 10 million Instagram users in South Africa, making the platform one of the biggest and most popular in the country. Left unchecked, providing teens with open access to the platform can result in situations with unfortunately dire consequences.

Social media can be a fun way to connect with friends, share content, and pursue various creative interests. On the opposite end of the scale however, unsupervised and untrammeled social media access has been shown to have a negative impact on teens. A study of more than 12,000 teens in the UK published in _The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health_ journal, found that using social media more than three times a day predicted poor mental health and wellbeing in teens.

Children aged 13–17 make up eight percent of Instagram's entire user base, with the Meta-owned [formerly Facebook] photo-sharing platform boasting almost 1.4bn active users of all ages every month. With such a large use base, Instagram is not immune to the variety of threats linked to social media including cyberbullying, predators, scams and inappropriate content.

As parents and caregivers, it's important to be aware of both the positive and negative influence of social media on teenagers. For many parents though, the challenge is understanding the various social media platforms well enough to keep teens away from harm.

Account privacy

Any account on Instagram can be public or private. While recent measures by Instagram have been taken to automatically have users under 16 set up with private accounts when they join Instagram, it is possible for that option to be manually set to public. A private account is generally the better option, as it requires the owner to approve any follow activity and who can view their content.

If a public profile is the option your teen wants, and you agree, consider discussing the risks carefully; letting everybody see everything on their feed might provide unsavoury characters with enough material to use for nefarious purposes.

Sliding into DMs

Not everything that happens on Instagram is visible – teenagers do not just like and comment on each other's posts or watch each other's stories – they also 'slide into each other's DMs'. This means to send a direct message (DM). DMs are a big part of Instagram's culture. It's therefore sensible to have control over who is messaging your children.

While Instagram prevents adults from sending messages to anyone under 18 unless they follow those adults, safety features recently rolled out by the platform to protect young users include prompts and safety notices to encourage vigilance in teens during conversations with adults they're already following.

Comments, tags, and mentions

Comments, tags, and mentions are more ways users can interact with each other. It would be wise to ensure random strangers can't tag your children to prevent any inappropriate interactions. Instagram's online support pages provide detailed guidance on removing tags, unwanted comments and managing privacy settings.

Stop the trolls by hiding and filtering

Social media interactions can sometimes turn sour with malicious comments and insulting messages. This is often the work of online trolls who try to encourage negative comments or enrage commenters further. As trolling can evolve into cyberbullying or cyberstalking, Instagram has a handful of features and settings to protect users from abusive behaviour. This is found under Instagram's *Hidden Words* setting. Parents and users are able to hide offensive comments by turning on Instagram's comment filtering system which will conceal comments containing flagged words or set up a custom word list to include offending terminology.

Safety should not be an afterthought

Whether your teenagers use Instagram to socialise, stay up to date with trends or share their lives, privacy and security should not be overlooked. Parents can better supervise their teenager's Instagram if they become familiar with the platform, so consider nudging your teen to take additional steps themselves aimed at promoting a rational use of the app. Open discourse with your teenager about both the dangers and benefits of the app will help to promote a sensible and safe use of Instagram.

School before cool

Algorithms on social media apps attempt to keep users on the platform for longer, many times distracting teenagers to the detriment of schoolwork and studying. In addition to providing a secure environment where links out to malicious content can be controlled, products like Eset's Security and Eset Parental Control has the ability for parents and caregivers to curate the content categories accessed across devices children are using to connect to the internet, whether it's a laptop, tablet or cellphone. The added benefit is that access times and screen times can be managed, too. With proper dialogue and understanding, children learn to see it as something in their best interest and value the time that they get to enjoy on the platform rather than censorship which provides for a more productive focus on school and schoolwork.

Eset offers various solutions to help parents and teens manage technology with confidence. Where technology is vital to progress, Eset is there to protect it. To learn more about more dangers faced by children online as well as about how technology can help, head over to Safer Kids Online.

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