

Where The Kids Are: Social Networks Parents May Not Know About

You know your kid is on Facebook, because no kid can be without it these days, and possibly Twitter as well. But following the September death of 12-year-old Rebecca Sedwick, and several other tragedies in which Internet bullying was implicated, other, less well-known services and websites used by teens are now under scrutiny.

Here are a few of the sites and services popular among the middle- and high-school crowd; they're not inherently risky or harmful, but as is often the case online, they are open to abuse by bullies, stalkers and other unsavory types.

Ask.fm Questions on Ask.fm range from the ordinary to the personal to the creepy. Anyone can ask, though it's up to the user to answer and display the question. Ask.fm is a site where you sign up with a basic profile and picture, and then answer questions posed to you by other users, both friends and strangers. While "Isn't social studies class the worst?" and "Who do you have a crush on?" are common threads, darker and more sexual questions show up as well. Ask.fm has been in the news lately after several young girls, members of the site, committed suicide after being harassed both online and offline.

There are several other question-and-answer sites, most of which emerged after the early success of Formspring, which might be considered the Myspace to the later sites' Facebook.

Tumblr may be thought of as a lightweight blogging platform, but its real allure is that it's also a loose social network teeming with young people liking one another's posts, commenting back and forth and fielding questions from strangers. Blogs on Tumblr can be funny, helpful, and creative, but they're also uncensored — and often pornographic. Kids can play in one part without encountering the other, but it's all part of the same big ecosystem.

Kik, Voxel, and WhatsApp are all variations on the same theme: free phone-to-phone messaging that's private, cross-platform, and lets you attach pictures and videos, all without counting towards SMS counts or minutes — or even showing up as anything more than generic data usage on a family phone bill. You don't even have to attach a phone number; like the instant messengers of old, all you need is a user name.

These apps are a great way for BFFs to chat back and forth and share pictures. But users are promiscuous with their usernames, posting them publicly and looking for anonymous chatters: "Uk 14 year old boys follow me pls," reads one review on Google Play, followed by their name; "Im 16 year old Male and hispanic ♥ Kik me (Only girls) ages 14-19 promise you won't regret it" reads another. It's not so far off from the days of AOL chatrooms and A/S/L (age/sex/location), but parents should definitely be aware, as

those were comparatively innocent times.

Snapchat has gained popularity (and notoriety) as an app that lets you send pictures to friends which disappear after a set amount of time. The erasure is not foolproof, so incriminating pics can always be captured. Millions use it every day to send fun pictures, show friends what they're doing, and yes, do a little sexting if they trust the person on the other end. Everyone's on Snapchat because it's fun and easy — but it's worth noting that the app can be set to receive pics from strangers, with predictable results.

Instagram lets users follow one another and share pictures - but a fair amount of socializing gets done, too. Instagram is another well-known app that everyone's on. Though it's a picture-posting forum, the level of social engagement it provides, like Tumblr, may surprise those who haven't used it. Who follows who, who liked what, who faked #nofilter, it's definitely fertile ground for gossip. And picture feeds full of selfies and favorite places may be open for the public to view, by oversight or on purpose — parents will have to decide whether it's creepy or innocuous.

Pheed is the latest thing to come along, merging the mixed-media feed of Tumblr with the instantaneous sharing of Kik and video chatting. Users can put statuses, photos, videos, audio and even live broadcasts — and you can even charge for people to access your "pheed," if you think they'll pay. Teens have jumped onto it, following the pheids of celebrities, DJs and friends.

A kid may be using one, some, or all of these apps. It's important to remember that they're not intrinsically bad in any way. But the potential for abuse is always there, especially when kids have a public-facing profile that can be viewed and contacted by anyone on the Internet. Being aware of the apps and services your kids are using — even if they'd rather you didn't know — is an increasingly important part of smart parenting.