

Current Internet and Social Media Tween/Teen Trends (2018)

This list is by no means exhaustive. Remember that by the time adults are aware of a trend, it is usually on its way out. This list provides a general idea of the types of apps that are currently popular with our students, primarily at the middle and high school levels. Visuals for the app shortcuts are included below each category/app discussed. The overall message is that you know what is installed on your child's devices!

1) Messaging Apps (Kik Messenger/WhatsApp/Facebook Messenger/WeChat)

Most teens are not using SMS messaging and instead opt to use messaging apps. Messaging apps are fast, don't incur messaging fees, work across platforms, and facilitate large group chats. They allow video and photo uploads and do not appear on parent phone bills. Kik requires parent permission from users between the ages of 13 and 18 and WhatsApp is for users 16 and over, but there is no way to monitor whether or not a teen puts in a false birthdate. This is the case with most smartphone apps that claim an age restriction. Many of these apps also default to sharing user locations in real time. WeChat encourages users to connect with strangers with features like "People Nearby" and "Shake."

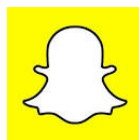


2) Content Supporting Destructive Behavior: Eating disorders/self-harm

Photo-sharing sites serve as forums for teenagers suffering from body image issues. Entire online communities exist that motivate teens to pursue their eating disorders (pro-ana and pro-mia). They post photos for "inspiration," offer tips, and provide a forum for teens to "support" each other. There are similar communities that promote cutting, burning, and other forms of self-harm. These destructive behaviors can be contagious and the internet may be spreading the contagion. The problem is widespread enough that Instagram tried banning searches for terms like #thighgap, #imugly, #frail, and #thinspiration. In response teens created variants (think #thighgaaaaaap). Now, when these terms are searched, Instagram and Tumblr direct users to a content advisory that warns users about the content and directs them to true support sites.

3) Snapchat

Snapchat is an extremely popular photo share site that has two scary components. First there is the use it is intended for — to share photos that disappear just seconds later — that encourages risk and leaves parents without the ability to track what their kids are doing. Second, tweens/teens may think they're sharing pics that will only be seen by their recipients, but all their friends have to do is take a screenshot for the photo to be dispersed on the web. While Snapchat does inform users if their "snap" has been screenshotted, kids get around this by using another phone to take a photo of the photo. This happens all the time! Snapchat also has a "story" feature that works similarly to Facebook's timeline.



4) Sarahah

Sarahah means honesty in Arabic. Sarahah essentially allows people to send completely anonymous comments to other users, with no way of the recipient replying or knowing who sent it to them. The app links to Snapchat and allows users to make anonymous comments to other people's stories. Users can then make comments without having their identities revealed. This has the strong potential for abuse and makes kids vulnerable to bullying.



5) Dating Apps (Tinder/Down/MeetMe/Badoo/Skout)

These apps that are intended for adults are being used by teens. At best apps like Tinder encourage casual sexual encounters and at their worst they make teens vulnerable to sexual predators.



6) Instagram

Instagram is hugely popular with teens who regularly post pictures (not all ones that they would like to see sent with their college applications) and use the chat platform extensively. Instagram is one of the most commonly used platforms to promote destructive behaviors (eating disorders, self harm, ect.)



7) Twitter

Twitter has been a platform of choice for some teens and is often a site for cyberbullying. Teens will post things about each other without naming the person, though everyone in their group knows who they are talking about, "throwing subs." Recently, Twitter is on the decline as it is being relegated to parents, much like Facebook.



8) Secret-Sharing Sites (Afterschool/Whisper)

Teens love sharing information (true or not) anonymously. They also love reading each other's posts and guessing who wrote them. Secret sharing sites encourage teens to post their own thoughts as well as not so flattering things about one another. Afterschool, the most popular of these apps, does monitor the content and generally keeps bullying and threats off—though it cannot effectively enforce the age restriction (13). The content on these sites is highly sexualized.



9) Sexting

Whether parents like it or not, this is extremely common. Teens send suggestive (often nude) selfies, engage in highly sexualized banter, and exchange sexually charged/suggestive emojis. The content shared between high-school-age kids (and many middle-school aged kids) would alarm and upset most parents. The research tells us that while this is upsetting to parents, as long as it is consensual it does not appear to cause long term harm.

10) Online Therapy sites (Blahtherapy)

Blahtherapy and sites like it offer free therapy via the internet. Teens connect with complete strangers (who need NO qualifications of any kind) looking for advice about their problems. Other than the obvious risk involved in having children expose their vulnerabilities to strangers on the internet, relying on fake therapy may prevent some teens from seeking out real help.

11) Live Streaming Apps (Meerkat/Periscope/YouNow)

Teens are increasingly not just sending static images and words, but using social video chatting and live-streaming. These are the closest thing to hanging out in person and tap into the natural desire of adolescents to connect, relate and belong. With these apps kids turn on the live-streaming feature, aim the camera on themselves, and broadcast to whomever is following them. Live-streaming is similar to video chat apps like FaceTime and Skype, but it's usually done with many people. Some adolescents have found internet fame by continuously live-streaming, even when they are sleeping. In extreme cases teens have used the technology to stream their own suicides or crimes, so it's very possible to see horrifying things because live video is nearly impossible to moderate and control. Privacy and safety are also major concerns. Since kids are often motivated to broadcast themselves to get approval, they may share personal information when asked or do things they wouldn't otherwise.



12) Google Drive

Google Drive is an important educational tool that has revolutionized how students and teachers communicate and share information. It is a wonderful way for students to collaborate with one another and with teachers. Student Google accounts at SSCPS can be viewed by the administration at any time and historical data is easily retrieved. Students are aware of this. Despite this knowledge students have used the commenting and sharing features of the different applications within drive to share inappropriate content and to have inappropriate conversations.



Sources:

Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) at Bridgewater State University

(<https://www.marccenter.org/>)

Common Sense Media (<https://www.common Sense Media.org/>)