



What's the big deal with Instagram?

Kidproof's Catherine Gerhardt gives the parenting lowdown on Instagram, the new social media phenom currently sweeping across girlworld.

Earlier this year my 11-year-old asked me if she could have access to Instagram. Heard of it? It's a social networking phenomenon that is taking the tween population by storm. In a nutshell, Instagram is a photo sharing app that makes photos fun.

Instagram is steadily growing in popularity among young and teen social networkers. At first it seems a relatively harmless way of sharing photos with each other via a smartphone. You can crop, adjust, reduce red eye and add filters. Even very ordinary photos can suddenly become appealing and interesting.

However, we are hearing from a lot of schools that Instagram is quickly taking over the social networking circuits and creating havoc within and between social groups. It is a sideways slide into social networking. Set up an account and within seconds you are able to comment, like and check out what your friends are doing. Facebook is out, Instagram is in.

What parents need to know

Instagram is a social networking service, and just like all other social networks "You must be at least 13 years old to use this Service". Why 13? The age of 13 has to do with COPPA – the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (in the USA) which simply applies to the online collection of personal information by persons under 13 years of age. A child who provides a fake birthday to get onto a social networking site is helping that site break the law, as they are unknowingly collecting information from an under-age child. The internet is the biggest public place our kids can possibly hang out in. Rules and guidelines are there for good reason.

How does it work?

Users can upload a photo from their smartphone photo album or take a photo right then and there and use Instagram to change the way the photo looks. Instagram





may be used as a photo-sharing social network on its own, but users also have the option to upload the photo to a number of other social media sites simultaneously, including Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr and Foursquare –depending on which one(s) the user syncs their settings with.

Privacy

The most important thing for users and parents to be aware of is that Instagram defaults to a public setting. Your profile and photos are public unless you tell it otherwise. Many parents may feel more secure knowing that their child has set their account to private, but watch to see how many followers your child has allowed onto their site. A child with a private setting that claims to have 222 followers means they have accepted 222 people to follow them, and not many tweens can say they genuinely socialise face-to-face with that many kids – no way! Remember even a private setting is still in a global public space, and the user's profile information is always public.

Signing up for an Instagram account requires that the user provide a username. In many cases young children use their real first and last names to create their accounts. To make matters worse, the sign-up process has an optional phone number section where users can submit their

phone number as part of their **public** profile. Talking with your kids about what is private information, such as a phone number, and explaining why we don't give this away is a great place to start.

Geotagging

Once a photo has been taken and is ready to share, the option of 'geotagging' – including details of the location of the photo – comes up. This option has to be checked, however as with most touch screen devices errors can easily occur and a photo can be inadvertently geotagged. Geotagging is a great way to showcase where a photo was taken, but it can also alert others to where the photographer has been, if not where they might be at that moment.

Blocking and reporting users and content

Although it seems innocent enough, there are users out there who will post inappropriate pictures. People will and do upload nude photos, drug use, and other inappropriate content. Social networking sites such as Instagram provide tools to block or report content and users and it would be a good idea to learn how to use them.

What can I do?

As a parent, continue to monitor your child's internet presence. At this time, it is not possible to sign up for an Instagram account on their website – it must be done by downloading the app to a smartphone. The app may be on your child's mobile device without you even knowing about it.

Help your child adjust their privacy settings at the outset so that their photos are only shared with face-to-face friends. Speak with your child about the safety concerns you may have if they accept requests from people they do not have real-life relationships with.

Sign up with Instagram yourself and have a go so that you understand how it works. If your child has an account, follow your child and monitor their behaviour to determine if Instagram is an appropriate hang out for them.

The answer for my 11 year old daughter was "not yet". However, she is welcome to use my account with my permission as we learn to navigate this new world of social media and digital citizenship together.