

TECH | FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

From Pinterest to Fitbit, No App Is Truly Kid-Safe. Here's What Families Can Do.

Porn and creeps can find a way into apps that seem safe, but there are ways to empower kids to block and report the bad guys



While most social media require users to be at least 13, the reality is that many younger children are signing on—and no platform is 100% safe.

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By [Julie Jargon](#)

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Children, without even searching for it, can stumble across porn or risqué images online, or receive messages from strangers. It happens in the most-innocuous places: the Fitbit activity-tracking app, Google Docs, [Pinterest](#) PINS -1.45% ▼ and, lately, [Facebook's](#) [FB](#) search engine.

Parents get exasperated trying to manage what their children see online. Just when you think you've instituted all the parental controls and installed all the web filters, your kid gets a friend request from a stranger or finds photos of lingerie-clad women while searching for cookie recipes.

Last weekend, the online parental-control and monitoring service Bark warned parents that due to some kind of bug in Facebook's search engine, typing a single letter into the search bar and then choosing to see video results yielded a lengthy menu of sexually explicit videos. "We're investigating reports of some inappropriate content showing up in some searches," a Facebook spokeswoman told me. "We're implementing changes and, out of an abundance of caution, we have disabled certain parts of search until we complete our investigation. We apologize for this error."

In December, Heather Gillstrap's 12-year-old daughter received in her email a Fitbit friend request from a stranger whose profile picture was of a partially nude woman. The Alabama mother removed her daughter's email address from the app.

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A Fitbit spokeswoman said the company's Fitbit Ace 2 is designed for kids 6 and up and was developed with safety in mind; all friend requests go to a parent's account for approval. Even with models intended for users 13 and older—like the Fitbit Alta that Ms. Gillstrap's daughter has—there are ways to [report inappropriate content and adjust settings](#) to keep certain information private. The spokeswoman said Fitbit has controls on the back end to stop a lot of the spammers but can't stop them all.

While most social media platforms, including Pinterest, require users to be at least 13 years old, the reality is that many younger kids are signing on. One mother said her 12-year-old son was searching for cookie recipes on Pinterest last fall and found photos of half-naked women. Another said the same thing happened to her while searching for a meatloaf recipe.

"We work hard to find and remove content that violates our policies, and continue to invest in our teams and technologies to keep such content off Pinterest," a Pinterest spokeswoman said. "If people find content that shouldn't be on Pinterest, we encourage them to report it to us."

"People tend to think there's safe social media, but it isn't true. And sometimes the predators are kids," said Tracy Bennett, a clinical psychologist and author of "Screen Time in the Mean Time: A Parenting Guide to Get Kids and Teens Internet Safe."

Several internet safety experts told me that middle- and high-school students have been using Google Docs to share nude photos of one another, often for the purposes of bullying fellow students. Brian Thomas, chief executive of [Lightspeed Systems](#), a software company that filters internet content for school districts, said because so many kids' social-media accounts are monitored by parents and their emails are monitored by schools, they've turned to Google Docs. He said his company has developed skin-tone analysis software to help flag potential porn to school districts.

Dr. Bennett said she had a client whose child was exchanging inappropriate messages over Google Docs with an adult involved with the school. "It was the child's academic account so the parents didn't think they had to monitor that," she said.

A Google spokeswoman said the company has a number of policies to help maintain a [positive experience while using Google Classroom](#) products, including one against publishing any sexually explicit or pornographic images or videos. She also said there is a mechanism for [reporting child endangerment of any kind in Google products](#).

What You Can Do



Determine your child's readiness. The first thing to consider before giving children a smartphone, or a social-media or online gaming account, is to assess their readiness. After all, helping them cope is more effective than trying to shield them from all the evils

of the internet.

Diana Graber, author of “Raising Humans in a Digital World: Helping Kids Build a Healthy Relationship with Technology,” offers a checklist that can help parents determine when their children are ready to post to social media or to play games online. Parents can ask themselves such questions as, “Can she manage her online reputation?” or “Can he protect his online privacy?”

If you determine your child is ready, some experts suggest developing a tech contract that lays out the rules of tech use and the consequences for violating them. Ms. Graber offers one and Dr. Bennett offers one too.

The nonprofit Organization for Social Media Safety just began offering a free online course on how to keep kids safe on social media.

Talk to your kids. Experts agree that the best defense is to have ongoing, open discussions about how to stay safe. That sounds simple, but where do you start?

Experts suggest talking to younger children about how they feel when something makes them uncomfortable so that they recognize those feelings when they come across something troubling on the internet. “You can say, ‘Have you ever talked to someone and it made you feel super weird even if you didn’t know why?’” Dr. Bennett said.

With older kids, she recommends having weekly discussions about news topics. Parents who sign up on her site receive weekly articles that can serve as a discussion starter. “You don’t have to run it like a meeting. The idea is to model open dialogue,” she said. “When parents seem interested in the virtual world, kids will bring you information about their visits to the virtual world.”

Make use of online safety tools—and involve your child. No parental control is completely foolproof—or even childproof—but a little effort can go a long way. Most apps have built-in mechanisms for blocking and reporting bad actors and for filtering explicit content. You can set up device-specific parental controls with varying degrees of granularity, depending on the platform. (Chromebooks, for instance, have some useful controls, but you can’t set specific hours that kids can use certain apps or services.) For even greater control, you can block apps and inappropriate content through your Wi-Fi router, or with an add-on networking device such as Circle.

Experts say it is less likely that children will circumvent parental controls if you set them up together and explain the rationale behind them. The settings you choose will likely differ depending on each child’s age and maturity level. For example, you might allow a 10-year-old to play online videogames with people he doesn’t know in real life, if he is mature enough to block and report friends who don’t play nicely, but you might choose more-restrictive settings for a 7-year-old.

Plus, teaching your children how to use the tools can empower them for the future. “By instilling the habit of blocking and reporting, you’re helping the platform remove inappropriate content and you’re strengthening your child’s mental defenses against this material because they are actively doing something about it,” said Marc Berkman, CEO of the Organization for Social Media Safety.

Teach good digital citizenship. While no one wants their kids to find inappropriate content online, it’s as important to teach them not to be a party to creating or sharing such content. Having discussions and setting rules around not posting, sharing or forwarding things that could be harmful to others can make them feel like they are part of the solution.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you think are the most effective ways to keep your children from seeing harmful content online? Join the conversation below.

[newsletter](#).

Write to Julie Jargon at julie.jargon@wsj.com

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“Anything kids share reflects on their digital reputation, and you want to teach your kids to be the same good people digitally that they are in person,” Ms. Graber said.

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