



P&C INVESTIGATES

# Does INSTAGRAM put kids at risk?

Millions of children (some as young as 6!) are snapping and posting their way through childhood—and most parents don't have a clue. **Sharon Duke Estroff** reveals the surprising ways this once grown-ups-only app is helping—and harming—its youngest fans



Kids post all kinds of crazy, sweet, and sometimes totally inappropriate things (bikini mags, anyone?!). Stay on top of what they're doing by sharing the account.





**“ABOUT HALF THE KIDS I SAW HAD PUBLIC ACCOUNTS. ONE OF THEM WAS 9 YEARS OLD.”**

**T**his is just how it happens with social media: One day it's a lonely little app in a sea of millions, and the next it's a pillar of the modern childhood experience. And so it has been with Instagram. I first heard about this photo-sharing site when my 10-year-old daughter complained that everyone else at school had an account but her. “Really?” I said. “Good.” (I can't stand when my kids use that line about being the only poor, deprived soul in a school full of Ugg-wearing, iPhone-toting, whatevering children.) And that was the end of that.

Then one Sunday, I picked up my daughter from a birthday party and found at least a dozen tweens, iPods and smartphones in hand, all Instagramming themselves silly. Except one. “I told you!” mouthed my daughter with an icy glare. I felt a stabbing pang of guilt. Was my daughter right? Was Instagram the new way kids bonded with each other? Could keeping Emma off this app be alienating her from her peers? I decided to do a little research.

“How many kids in your class Instagram?” I asked some kids at the soccer field that weekend.

“Everyone in my school is on it,” said Jessica, 9. “I even know one kindergartner who Instagrams.”

“Pretty much all of them,” said Zoe, 10, an Instagram fanatic with 678 followers.

“Samantha's on it, all right,” said the mom of one of my daughter's

teammates. “You'd think she was going to die without it. She told me her friends were on it, posting pictures of cupcakes and puppies. So I let her join.”

Cupcakes and puppies? Really? Not long thereafter, I caved.

“Okay,” I said to my daughter, finally. “You can sign up for Instagram, but you're going to follow my rules, got it?”

“Yes, Mommy!” Emma exclaimed. “I promise!”

## WHAT WE WERE IN FOR

In case, like many parents, you are in the dark about Instagram, here's a quick snapshot: Technically, it's an app for teens and up. It combines aspects of Photoshop, Twitter, Facebook, and retro Kodak Instamatic, allowing users with screen names and pithy public profiles to upload pictures from their smartphones for others to see. They add captions to their photos, which are then “liked,” commented on, and reposted by others (see *“How to Instagram Like a Pro,”* p. 46).

The app boasts more than 100 million users worldwide, and while many of those are adults, a growing number of users are under the age-13 cutoff. “There are tons of young kids on Instagram,” says Lisa Shaw, senior director of child online safety at Spectorsoft Monitoring Technologies. “If you have an iPod or smartphone, the app is very accessible.”

Larry Rosen, Ph.D., professor of psychology at California State University and the author of the

new book *iDisorder* is not surprised by millennial kids' Instagram obsession. “Children born after the year 2000 are part of Generation C—the Connected Generation,” Rosen explains. “Connecting, collaborating, and communicating on social media like Instagram is as natural to them as breathing air.”

Up until recently, most elementary-aged kids filled their virtual social needs on sites like Disney-owned Club Penguin, Webkinz, and Fantage, a popular tween virtual world. Then along came Instagram, with its kid-friendly simplicity and colorful photos, and the playing field changed. Before long, a combination of virtual and real world chatter among children had crowned this grown-up app the new king of kiddie culture. But how child-safe was this new platform for communication?

Determined to find out, the night I helped Emma set up an Instagram profile, I created an identity of my own. CupcakePuppy44: a fun-loving 10-year-old girl with an affinity for Justin Bieber and all things adorable. Then I spent the next three weeks in the trenches of the Instagramming world, learning how it works and how best to protect my child from possible predators, unkind peers, and the unintended consequences of her own posts. Emma and her friends knew about my mission; they even provided guided tours. What I learned during my undercover mission was eye-opening—especially that there are actually some upsides to all this.

Still, it's not something to launch into blindly, so here's what you need to know before letting your kids join the Insta-fun.

**LESSON 1**  
**Nobody is supervising**

You know that old shampoo commercial: I told two friends and they told two friends and so on and so on? That's Instagram, only the scope is a gazillion times greater. You start out connecting with kids you know, then you connect with kids they know, and on and on. As a member of the Instagram community, you have access to other children's profiles that often include their full name; their age; their headshot; and a list of their schools, camps, hobbies, and favorite pop icons. Parents, meanwhile, are nowhere to be found.

**WHAT'S OK** Kids this age crave peer acceptance, and Instagram provides them with a ready-made social group with whom to exchange ideas. "Elementary school kids require a sense of belonging," says Marshall Duke, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Emory University. Instagram can give them that sense of community, and unlike with the cliques they face during school recess, they don't need someone else's approval to join.

It even helps kids connect in the real world, too. "My friends and I Instagram at sleepovers," says Carly, 8. "We give each other crazy hairstyles and make silly faces, then post the pictures. It's really fun."

**WHAT'S NOT** In the absence of parental supervision, things can spiral out of control. I saw little boys tossing around four-letter words like footballs; I followed young girls who asked me to "like" their pictures if "you think I look sexy"; I viewed popular posts that included an alleged paparazzi pic of Zac Efron's private parts. No voice of authority was present to guide these posts back onto a constructive track.

Most elementary-aged kids are still in their first stage of moral

## HOW TO *INSTAGRAM* LIKE A PRO

A cheat sheet for moms and dads

- 1  Download the free app and open an account.
- 2  Create your personal profile. (That's our writer, Sharon Duke Estroff!)
- 3  Click on the compass icon to explore photos, comments, and icons. To follow, click the screen name, then the "FOLLOW" button.
- 4  As you wait for people to follow you, scroll your feed and "LIKE" deserving posts.
- 5  Now it's your turn to take a photo! SNAP!
- 6  When a heart icon appears, SMILE! Someone liked it—and you are now officially Instagramming.

development, says Duke. They learn to behave appropriately to avoid punishment, not because of internal ethics. "Because Instagram allows these behaviors to go on, kids implicitly believe that they are okay," he cautions.

**LESSON 2**  
**Your child is connecting with strangers**

Back in the old days, being followed by someone you didn't know was downright creepy. On Instagram, being followed is a measure of a child's popularity. "I have 447 followers!" bragged Ben, 8, who checks his follower stats "like 20 times a day." More followers also mean more "likes" on your posts—another self-esteem perk for kids. "The 'Like' button carries with it a feeling of caring and kindness," says Rosen, who has researched use of the button in his lab. "It makes you feel appreciated."

That sense increases when one child links to another kid's post, with a message such as, "Please follow my friend @awesome\_lucy. She's really nice and pretty."

**WHAT'S OK** Kids helping other kids gather followers is an endearing example of peer support, and one of several ways I saw kids using Instagram for positive purposes. For instance, if a girl posted a photo of herself in a new outfit, followers would comment on how pretty she looked. When a boy posted the trophy he'd recently earned, his followers told him he rocked. As parents, we strive to raise children who will become compassionate members of society. In a new-fangled way, Instagram helps reinforce caring communal behaviors.

**WHAT'S NOT** But it's hard to know everyone who's in your child's online community. Instagrams are public unless you change the settings (*see*

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## 4 RULES TO KEEP KIDS SAFE

“4 Rules to Keep Kids Safe,” right), which means anyone can follow anyone.

About half the kids I saw on Instagram had public accounts. One of them was 9-year-old Hannah, whom I know in real life.

“My first follower was this weird old man,” she told me.

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“I deleted him. But he came back two days later.”

Instagram also has a feature called Photo Map, which pinpoints the precise location a photo was taken. That means if your child takes a picture at your house and adds it to Photo Map (which is easy to do both knowingly and unknowingly) followers see exactly where she is, down to the street number.

The good news: You can alter the settings to be private, which means people have to request permission to follow you and view your stuff. But even then, a child’s profile remains public, so a stranger can still send a follower request. Thanks to the more followers equals more popular mentality, children are often inclined to accept every request they get.

### LESSON 3

#### It’s really hard to block all the risky content

My initial fear was who would be following my daughter on Instagram. Soon, I had another worry: Who was *she* following?

“How do you find people to follow?”

I asked some third and fourth graders.

“I look at who my friends are following,” said Jacob.

“I search stuff I like and follow people who come up,” said Sarah.

“I follow my sister and brother and all their friends,” said Elliott. (His siblings are 15 and 19.)

“Whoever follows me,” said Lauren.

**WHAT’S OK** Many elementary-aged children are developmentally egocentric (they really *do* think the world revolves around them!). Glimpsing life from the perspective of someone not

in their inner circle can broaden their frame of reference.

**WHAT’S NOT** Since Instagramming kids follow all kinds of people, all kinds of posts show up in their feeds. “I was checking my daughter’s Instagram feed when a sex scene showed up!” says Melissa Miller of Alpharetta, GA. “The screen name had something to do with Justin Bieber. My daughter said she found him during a Justin Bieber search.”

Despite my tight security, inappropriate posts still found their way to my own daughter’s feed: A string of raunchy jokes posted by a boy in her class who had re-posted them off of his older sister’s Instagram; pictures of a friend’s older brother funneling beer at a fraternity party; 20 minutes later, the same boy urinating on a car. As a parent, I was mortified. “Was it a huge mistake to let my 10-year-old join Instagram?” I ask Rosen. His response eases my guilty conscience.

“I don’t believe it was a mistake,” he says. “Instagram is the way her friends are connecting; you don’t want her to be left out. But I would let her know that the account belongs to both of you. You get to approve her followers and followees. You have her password and rights to review all of her posts. If she complains, tell her you can revisit the topic when she’s 13.”

At the end of my immersion, I was left relieved (no ax murderers that I saw), but also conflicted. The democratic platform of social media means that the ability to censor material or share it on an age-appropriate basis is nearly impossible. It can be tempting to ban social media altogether. But as our children grow, our ability to control their interaction with technology shrinks. The best we can do, as parents, is be there, strapped in beside our kids, making the journey down this uncharted digital road together. **P&C**

#### CREATE A JOINT ACCOUNT

Maintain control of the password and the right to nix any followers, followees, posts, or comments. Don’t be sneaky: Let your kids know what you are doing.



#### MAKE IT PRIVATE

Set your child’s account to private and turn off the geo-location services in her Instagramming device. Tell her to never activate Instagram’s Photo Map option. Help her select a screen name that doesn’t give away age or gender, and be sure her profile image is generic: No faces, no personal information.



#### SET LIMITS

This app is highly addictive, and without parent-imposed boundaries (e.g., no more than twice daily at 15 minutes a pop), kids may never get off it.



#### PRACTICE ONLINE ETIQUETTE TOGETHER

Make positive comments on friends’ posts. Scroll through other kids’ pictures and talk about which ones are appropriate or not. Show her how to block and report people (by clicking on the offender’s profile page and tapping the report or block button).

Sharon Duke Estroff is the author of *Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah?* She lives in Atlanta.