

When was the last time you hung out on Omegle, streamed on Periscope, messaged on Kik, or shared a secret on Whisper? If you are over 35 and your response to this question was “what,” you are not alone. These are just a few of the many apps used primarily by the youngest technology users in our society.

Being a parent in the age of social media is a daunting task. Social media and the internet have brought to their users the ability to quickly and easily access experiences and influences that would have taken those in pre-social media times years or decades to take in. Today a parent must not only be concerned about who their children are associating with in real life, but also what influences they are accessing through technology. At this point, you may be hoping that I can provide you with a list of the top 10 apps your kids should avoid. Unfortunately, it isn’t that easy. While there are many parenting resources on the internet that offer opinions on apps to avoid, they become dated very quickly. Any approach that talks about the things to watch for today, is only going to be valuable for a short time as social media evolves at warp speed. Before these trends were a thing, would you ever have imagined that people would encourage others to eat Tide pods, purposely spill a gallon of milk in a store, assault a teacher, or the latest challenge of intentionally overdosing on Benadryl and recording the results? Addressing these ill-advised behaviors individually begins to feel like a game of whack-a-mole. Every time you address one specific problematic behavior, the next one pops up a short time later.

I believe the solution to social media safety for children lies in having age-appropriate conversations with your children about their online safety. I know from experience that children, especially teenagers, can give the impression that an adult’s opinion is unwelcomed, uninformed, or out of touch. I think we’ve all experienced the exasperated sighs or virtually audible eye rolls. Contrary to the impressions they sometimes give, I do believe children listen to and value parents’ counsel. The Minnesota Student Survey is a series of standardized questions posed to students in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11 once every three years. In this voluntary and anonymous survey, students are asked a variety of questions about their experiences with school, family, and safety. According to the data from the 2019 survey, 86.4% of 11th grade students in Benton County schools reported that they felt their parents cared about them either “Quite a bit” or “Very much.” In this same group of students, 85.5% reported believing they could talk to a parent or guardian about problems they were having. The numbers for younger students reflect even stronger beliefs in these statements. Your children know you have their best interests at heart and are ready to talk to you.

My recommendation for conversation on social media dangers focus on protecting children’s privacy, helping them develop a healthy skepticism of those they meet online, and protecting their personal safety. Far too many families have learned the painful lesson that information or images shared electronically can spread like wildfire and will likely be available forever once shared. Parents should learn about the social media apps their children use and talk to their children about the importance of keeping personal information private. It is equally important children understand the dangers of sharing private images of themselves. Consider employing the grandma rule by advising your children to ask themselves if they would want their grandma to see what they are about to post or share. Next, talk to your children about the hidden dangers inherent in online friendships. Too often, criminals and predators lurk in the virtual areas populated by young people as high-tech versions of wolves in sheep’s clothing. Help your children understand that their online friend who claims to be one of their peers, regardless of how convincing their profile appears, may be someone seeking to groom them into doing things they wouldn’t normally do. Teach your children to be alert for individuals who pressure them to

send images or engage in other behavior that they know grandma wouldn't approve of. Finally, ensure that your child knows about the dangers of meeting online "friends" in person, that real harm can come to people who attempt ill-advised social media challenges, and that you are always available to talk when they have concerns about something that happened to them online.

Instead of trying to keep up with the whack-a-mole game created by the dark side of social media, keep your children safe by teaching them how to spot and avoid danger. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.