

The FOSI Guide to TikTok

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What is TikTok?

TikTok is a popular social media platform that allows users to watch, create, and share short-form videos. These videos are typically 15 to 60 seconds long. The content of these videos ranges from viral dance trends and memes to educational content and global news. With an easy-to-use video editing interface, including filters and effects, and access to millions of sounds/songs, TikTok empowers everyday teenagers and adults alike to become creators.

According to [Pew Research Center](#), 63% of teenagers use TikTok, making it one of the most popular apps among teens in the United States, second only to YouTube. 57% of teens use TikTok daily, with 16% of teens reporting they used the app “almost constantly.” Teenage girls are more likely than teenage boys to use TikTok “almost constantly.” Black and Hispanic teens are also more likely to use the app “almost constantly” compared to White teens.

What makes TikTok so popular is the **For You** feed (or FYF, for short). The For You feed is a personalized stream of content based on individual user behavior, constantly evolving to match the users’ interests and activity. This is better known as “the algorithm.”

TikTok is owned by the company ByteDance and launched internationally in 2018 after merging with another short-form video phenomenon, Musical.ly. Since then, it has become a key part of modern pop culture and the Gen Z cultural zeitgeist. TikTok has 1.8 billion monthly active users worldwide, and countless popular musicians, businesses, influencers, and educators have launched and skyrocketed their careers on the app.

TikTok is free to download and use, but includes monetization features such as in-app purchases via **TikTok Shop** (TikTok’s service to advertise and purchase products directly in-app) and **LIVE Gifts** (virtual gifts sent/received during livestreams), though these features are age-restricted to users 18 and up.

Helpful Definitions to Know

Family Pairing: TikTok's main parental control tool that allows parents and guardians to link their TikTok account to their child's. Through *Family Pairing*, caregivers can block access to TikTok during customizable hours, set daily screen time limits, filter content using *Restricted Mode*, control search and comment settings, decide who can message and follow their teen's account, and review and manage privacy settings.

Restricted Mode: a setting that filters content flagged as potentially mature or unsuitable, and helps limit the appearance of content that may not be age-appropriate for minors. It is not 100% foolproof, but it does help filter out content kids are not ready to see.

Digital Safety Partnership for Families: a template agreement, developed by TikTok in partnership with FOSI, designed to help families start conversations about online experiences and set healthy digital boundaries together.

TikTok for Younger Users: a "view-only" experience on TikTok that allows kids under 13 in the United States to see curated content meant specifically for children. This version of the app also includes private accounts, no commenting, sharing, or messaging, and a set 60-minute daily screen time limit.

Community Guidelines: a set of guidelines enforced by TikTok to protect users from harmful or inappropriate content, covering areas like harassment, hate speech, nudity, and misinformation. These guidelines apply to all accounts and content on the app.

For You (For You feed): A personalized stream of content based on individual user behavior, constantly evolving to match the users' interests and activity. The For You feed is also known as "the algorithm" and is the main page users see upon opening the app.

TikTok Shop: TikTok's service to advertise and purchase products directly in-app. *Note: Only users 18 and up can make purchases or sell items.*

LIVE Gifts: Virtual gifts sent/received during livestreams. *Note: Only users 18 and up can go LIVE or send/receive gifts.*

Direct Messaging: TikTok's private messaging and chat feature. *Note: Direct Messaging is only available to users 16 and older.*

Manage Topics: a control that allows users to customize how often content related to over 10 popular topics—including art, nature, sports, and travel—is recommended in their TikTok feed.

Duet: A feature that lets users record a video side-by-side with another video.

Stitch: A feature that lets users clip and respond to a portion of someone else's video by adding their own clip.

TikTok's Parental Controls

The main parental control TikTok offers is **Family Pairing**, which lets parents and guardians link their TikTok account to their teen's. Once connected, caregivers can manage how much time their teen spends on the app, what kind of content they see using **Restricted Mode**, whether they can search for videos, who can search for or message them, and who can comment on their posts. In addition to managing what teens see, Family Pairing also allows caregivers to set **daily screen time limits** and schedule downtime using TikTok's **Time Away** feature, which prevents access to the app during specific hours. TikTok also displays **screen time break reminders** and digital wellbeing videos that encourage users to unplug and take breaks, helping support a healthier relationship with the platform.

TikTok's **default safety features** vary by age group. TikTok users under age 13 in the United States are only able to access a "view-only" experience on **TikTok for Younger Users**. For users ages 13 to 15, TikTok defaults accounts to private and restricts certain features such as Direct Messaging. For users ages 16 and 17, TikTok defaults new accounts to public, but provides a simple switch to private if the teen chooses. Regardless of age, any user under 18 cannot livestream or send and receive virtual gifts.

Open family dialogue is incredibly important when using these tools. TikTok's **Guardian's Guide** states that "settings are most effective when paired with regular conversations between caregivers and teens." TikTok also provides the **Digital Safety Partnership for Families**, a template agreement developed with FOSI designed to help families start conversations about online experiences and set positive digital boundaries together. While not specific to any one social media platform or service, the resource aims to help families make online safety choices tailored to their individual needs.

TikTok uses a set of **Community Guidelines** to apply to all content and all accounts on its platform. If users believe something violates these guidelines, TikTok lets them report and/or block them. Furthermore, the app allows users to filter comments by blocking specific keywords, hiding spam, or disabling comments on videos entirely. Users can block or report any account, comment, or video they see directly within the app. Family Pairing allows caregivers to restrict who can interact with their teenager's content and allows them to block specific accounts from appearing on the teen's feed. Teens can request exceptions to these rules, but Family Pairing allows parents and guardians to have the final approval.

For more in-depth information about TikTok's safety and privacy tools, visit **TikTok's Guardian's Guide and Safety Center** to learn more.

How do kids use TikTok?

TikTok's ease of use, global reach, and potential for virality make it a versatile platform teenagers can engage with in a variety of ways. Here are some of the most common:

- **To participate in trends and pop culture.** TikTok is where much of Gen Z's cultural conversation lives. Teens can easily participate in trends by using a trending audio or taking part in a viral challenge, and can feel closer to the pop culture moment by expressing their takes, sharing funny memes, and relating to others their age.
- **To express themselves through creative content creation.** TikTok offers a wealth of in-app tools for video creation, including a range of filters, green screen options, voiceover and music overlays, and more. Additionally, features like Duet or Stitch allow users to remix each other's content and turn it into a collaborative effort, creating and sharing content.
- **To connect with friends and communities.** Many teens will follow their friends, interact with their favorite creators, and build connections through the app. Commenting, reposting, and collaborating through features like Duet and Stitch are all common ways users can interact with each other and maintain social connections online.
- **To discover and learn about their interests.** TikTok's personalized For You feed curates an engaging stream of short, accessible videos tailored to the users' interests as determined by their behavior and preferences. Teens also have access to TikTok's *Manage Topics* feature that allows them to customize how often content related to over 10 popular topics is recommended in their feed—from art, travel, nature, and sports to more. Teens can use the app to explore their hobbies, learn about new ones through algorithmic recommendations, and develop skills via tutorials and advice videos. Additionally, teens also use TikTok to educate themselves in subjects like history and science, technology, engineering, and math with the dedicated STEM feed, which is enabled for teens by default.
- **To engage with news and advocacy.** Especially in recent years, many users have found TikTok to be a valuable educational hub for news updates, advocacy, and important issues. Topics like climate change, mental health, and human rights are often shared in short, digestible formats that feel relatable and accessible to users who may not follow traditional news sources.

What are the benefits of TikTok?

- ***Creativity and Digital Skills.*** TikTok makes content creation highly accessible for users from all walks of life. Scripting, editing, storytelling, sound design, and trend awareness are all skills needed to make content that can be developed through making TikToks. The app allows teenagers to experiment with content while becoming comfortable with digital tools. TikTok also helps teens learn how to communicate visually and effectively in a fast-paced environment. These are universal skills that could benefit them in school or their future careers.
- ***Community and Social Support.*** For many teenagers, TikTok is a space to connect with others like them. TikTok houses many communities and sub-communities centering around shared identities and experiences, offering teens the valuable opportunity to access encouragement and relatability that they may not receive offline.
- ***Access to Educational Resources.*** TikTok's format encourages bite-sized lessons that help conceptualize lofty and complex topics. Through the STEM feed, teenagers have access to educators, subject matter experts and STEM communicators for lessons that teenagers may find easier to grasp online than they would in a classroom setting.
- ***Representation and Identity Exploration.*** TikTok's For You feed exposes teens to a wide range of voices and opinions. TikTok offers teens the opportunity to see themselves represented online in ways they may not have seen in their personal lives or traditional media, and also explore content from people that cause them to constructively challenge their own beliefs.
- ***Relaxation and Entertainment.*** Like with many digital apps, TikTok provides users an easy and relaxing opportunity to scroll through content they enjoy without having to commit to longer-form or complex content. The app can offer distraction, laughter, and a sense of novelty to those looking to unwind for a bit.

What should parents look out for as their teens explore and use TikTok?

- **Excessive Use and Endless Scrolling.** TikTok provides an endless stream of ultra-personalized short-form content. The app is highly entertaining, and it can be easy to let time pass by while watching video after video. Through TikTok's parental controls and other measures, parents can help their teenagers by setting screen time limits and keeping their usage at a healthy amount through the Family Pairing tools.
- **Exposure to Harmful or Inappropriate Content.** Though TikTok's Restricted Mode filters out a substantial amount of inappropriate content, there is always a chance teens could be exposed to harmful and/or inappropriate content. The younger a user is, the harder it may be for them to understand when content is helpful versus harmful. Through employing parental controls and maintaining active supervision and open communication, parents and guardians can greatly minimize any unsuitable exposure.
- **Mental Health Risks and Negative Social Comparison.** As with many social platforms, TikTok can amplify feelings of insecurity through exposure to curated lifestyles, beauty standards, or popularity metrics. This can adversely impact self-esteem and body image. Encourage teens to use features like "Not Interested" to filter content, follow creators who promote positivity and self-acceptance, and talk openly about how social media makes them feel.
- **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment.** Whether it be through the comment section, direct messages, or actual videos shared, cyberbullying is a very real and unfortunately widespread behavior on social media. Remind your teen to use TikTok's features to block or report instances of cyberbullying and harassment, take action through Family Pairing, and communicate with your child on who they are watching and interacting with, and how they are making them feel.
- **Misinformation and Harmful Algorithmic Recommendations.** Some content on TikTok may prioritize views over facts, exposing users to misinformation via conspiracy theories, biased commentary, or even illegitimate medical or legal claims. By encouraging your child to critically examine the content they have watched and report it if they think it is misinformation, you can help them sort through misleading or sensational content and develop information literacy.



Want to learn more about TikTok?

Watch your child's favorite TikTok videos and creators along with them. Have them explain what they enjoy about the content, how it makes them feel, and why they like using the platform. Additionally, join your child in making a TikTok video, or ask them about the content they are creating.

Remember to have frequent, open conversations with your child about their online experiences to ensure they feel supported, safe, and confident as they explore TikTok and beyond.

To learn more about FOSI and our work promoting a culture of responsibility online and encouraging a sense of digital citizenship for all, be sure to check out our [TikTok page](#).

