

Common Sense on Instant Messaging

Some facts

- > On average, kids 8 to 18 spend 17 minutes per day instant messaging. 15- to 18-year-olds spend nearly 30 minutes.
- > When young people are doing homework on the computer, they are instant messaging 7% of the time.
- > As many as 34% of kids are cyberbullied. Of kids who are cyberbullied, 40% say it happened while Instant Messaging.
- > Monitoring software exists that allows parents to capture Instant Messages without their kids knowing. Net Nanny is the most popular, but there are many others.

DU HAV A CLU?

Your kids' fingers are furiously clicking away on their phone or keyboard. But what are they saying, and who to? Ways of communicating have definitely changed, and young people are at the forefront of new ways to do it. Here we explain some of the most popular ways kids chat, and how you can help them stay safe and smart. Because when it comes to kids and technology, you can never have TMI.

What is it?

Instant messaging, known as IM, allows for text or video talk in real time. Kids do it through AOL's AIM, Gtalk, MySpace or Facebook IM, iChat, and now, their phones. Kids text chat with one or more friends in short bursts in IM slang (R U OK?). It's shorthand that often seems like a secret code.

Kids create anonymous screen names (SNs) so that they can communicate without necessarily revealing who they are. They get "buddies" and add them to buddy lists so they can instantly see who is available to chat at any time. Newer computers come with built-in cameras enabling visual IM. Video chats can be way more revealing due to the nature of what happens to kids when a camera is turned on them. But it's also a nice way to say hello to distant friends and relatives.

Why it matters

Starting in middle school, IM can be a great way for kids to connect with one another. But it also can be a major time waster and homework interrupter. IM is a really powerful and fast way to spread information, and the anonymity of IM-ing allows kids to try on different behaviors and personalities. Cautious kids can become outspoken – which is positive. But kids can also use IM's relative anonymity to spread cruel or embarrassing gossip. It's easy to take a confidence from an IM conversation and cut and paste it into another and send it to the world.

Tips for all kids

- > **Keep them safe.** Make sure that kids know to never give out their real names, phone numbers, addresses, or the name of their schools to people online.
- > **Keep it real.** Kids should know the people they are IM-ing in real life. Friends of friends of friends can be creepy predators. Remind them to have healthy skepticism about anyone introduced that way. Consider running through their buddy lists with them periodically to make sure they can tell you something personal about each buddy on that list.

Tips for elementary school kids

- > **We don't recommend elementary school kids use IM.** They don't have the maturity to use it wisely.

Tips for middle school kids

- > **Keep kids' doors open.** Better yet, keep the computer in a central place. This will help kids stick to your rules about time, and help you monitor who they are chatting with. And if your kids are using visual chat? Make sure they are dressed right and only showing unidentifiable places in the home.
- > **Set use rules.** Set firm rules about time and place. Make sure they know that they aren't allowed to chat and do homework at the same time. Reinforce rules about online behavior. No sex talk, no trash talk, and no rumors.
- > **Keep IM at home.** Minimize IM by keeping it on a computer. If it gets to their phones, they are never going to be disconnected.

For high school kids

- > **Have standards.** However they are communicating, kids have to know what is and isn't okay. Set rules about violent talk, sexual talk, and bullying behavior. They may not seem to be hearing you, but it's very important that you make your expectations clear about what is and isn't acceptable.

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