

Ask.fm – What It Is and What Parents Need to Know

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“Ask.fm is a toxic site. Toxic means: poisonous, virulent, noxious, deadly, dangerous, harmful, injurious, pernicious. And that’s exactly what Ask.fm is to people your age, and even adults. And shame on the people that started that site.”

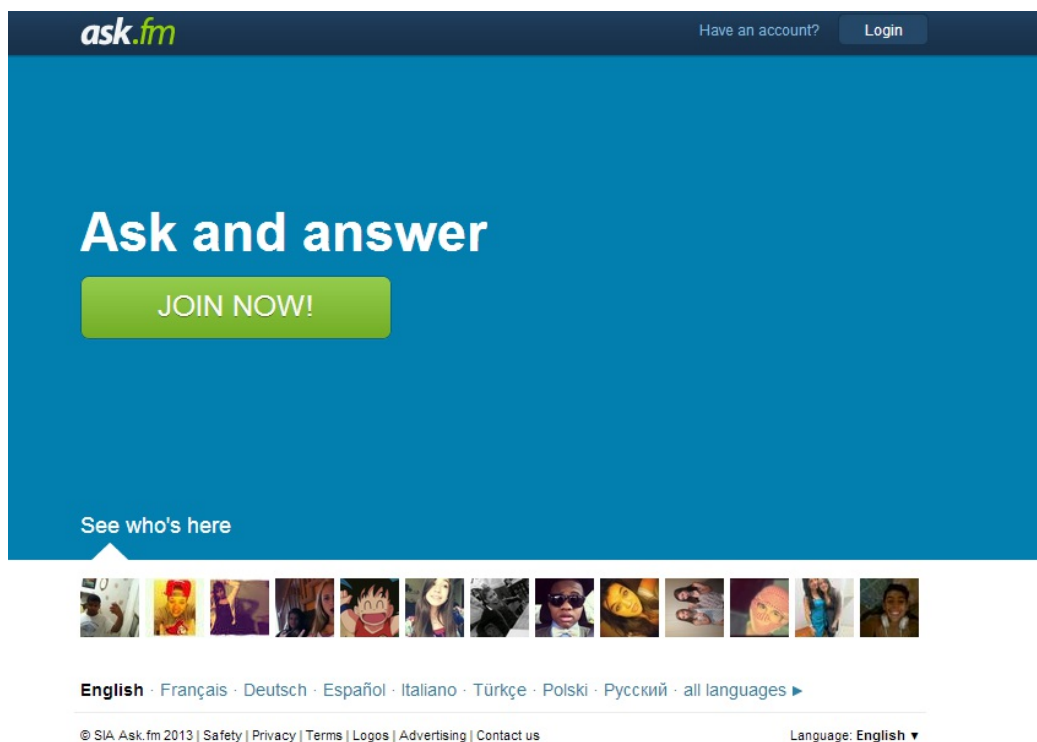
Those are the exact words I said to my 12 and 14 year old boys when we were talking about Ask.fm.



In the wake of Hannah Smith’s suicide, a lot of people have been talking about the Latvia-based question and answer social network, Ask.fm. Like many Ask.fm users, most of whom are children and teens (Ask.fm is for those 13 and up, so these children are lying about their age), Hannah was the recipient of dozens of hateful and abusive messages, including comments that told her to “drink bleach” and “go get cancer”. Her death is the fourth suicide linked to Ask.fm. You can read more details about the investigation into Hannah’s death and Ask.fm, [here](#).

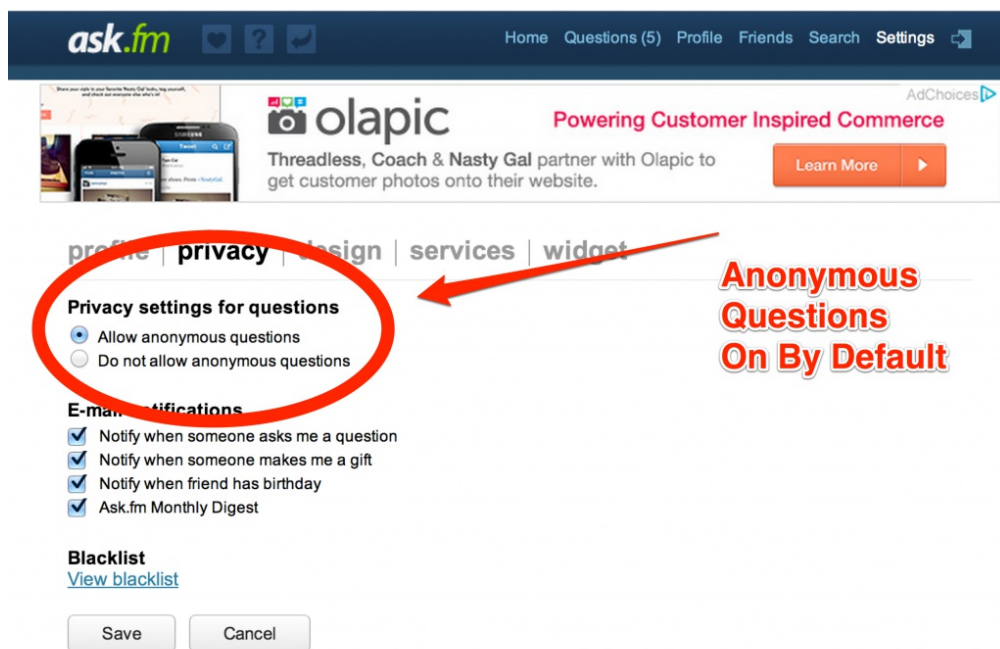
So what is Ask.fm anyway?

Ask.fm is a conversational Q&A service. Users can create a profile where other users can post questions anonymously or with a name. Questions that have recently been answered are visible on the user’s profile. Ask.fm allows users to record video answers as well. The website has been translated into 24 languages, making it available to users all over the world.



Browse the site for a few minutes and it becomes obvious that the people asking the questions usually know the recipient on a personal basis, either through other social networks or in real life. Though anonymous cyberbullying

can happen just about anywhere on the Internet, Ask.fm's anonymous default setting doesn't make the situation any better. Basically, if a user doesn't manually change this setting, anyone can ask them questions anonymously.



What's the role of a company like Ask.fm?

Patti Agatston, Ph.D. and co-author of *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* says, "Sites that offer the opportunity for anonymous queries should not be anonymous by default, but rather should allow questions and comments with identities shown by default. A user would have to actively change their default preferences if he or she wishes to allow anonymous questioning," she says. "This would offer some protection for vulnerable youth since such sites typically allow users as young as 13."

As Agatston also points out, shutting down Ask.fm won't solve any problems as other sites will be created to replace it. Formspring.me is an example of another Q&A social network that millions of teens use daily (you can read more about Formspring [here](#)). Instead, we parents need to recognize the problem for what it truly is and take a proactive approach to being more involved in our child/teen's online activities (including which apps they use on their smartphone), and more importantly, their life.

As many parents, educators and scientists know, a child's mind is very malleable. Feeling lonely, bored or left-out could prompt them to seek social acceptance or positive reinforcement on the Internet. This is a very dangerous game because clearly social networks like Ask.fm play some part in a child's decision to inflict self-harm. It's also important to remember that, as easy as it is to find compassionate, warm-hearted people on the Internet, it's just as easy to encounter bullies who will quickly throw out some of the meanest comments you can imagine. Sadly, as you can see from Hannah's case, sometimes these comments can be life-threatening.

What can I do?

Engaging in regular talks with your child, introducing them to extracurricular activities, or simply hanging out with them can make all the difference in terms of the way they think about themselves and the world around them. There's so much for them to experience and learn, they shouldn't need sites like Ask.fm or Formspring to make them feel loved or accepted. It's equally important to notice the signs; for example, if your child is locked in their room all day in front of a computer, something is probably wrong whether they admit it or not. Schedule an activity and pick them up from school early, take them somewhere fun to eat and just talk. These moments can help build their self-esteem and

confidence, and ultimately give them a better understanding of what's important in life.

If you feel you need to block sites like Ask.fm from your home computer, you can follow the step-by-step picture guides below.

- [Windows Vista and Windows 7](#)
- [Windows 8](#)
- [Mac OSX](#)

If you need to block Ask.fm from being downloaded to your child or teen's smartphone, you can follow the guides for iOS and Android below.

- [iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad](#)
- [Android devices](#)