

Kik – What It Is and What Parents Need to Know

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Parents are concerned about sexting – [and rightfully so](#). But as a result of that concern, I believe there's also a heightened sense of awareness among parents. I get emails from parents every day, asking how to prevent their child from downloading certain apps, and what's the best way to monitor what their child is doing on their smartphone. Sexting continues to be an underlying concern in all of these conversations — probably because kids and teens use their smartphones to text more than anything else, and according to kids in the UK, [sexting is just the new way to flirt](#). But what a lot of parents aren't aware of is the fact that their child doesn't need to be on a texting plan in order to text. There are plenty of third-party apps that offer texting services for free, and one that has come up in several conversations that I've had with parents is Kik.



What Is Kik?

Kik is an instant messenger app—think AIM chat or texting. The app is available for free on all mobile platforms, and is well-received by the millions of people, mainly because it can replace a texting plan through their cell provider. Through their data plan or Wi-Fi connection, Kik users can send and receive text messages and photos to an individual on their Kik contact list, or they can start a group chat with several Kik contacts. Instead of using phone numbers, each Kik member has a username. This username can be accompanied by a profile photo, if the user wishes, but ultimately this is Kik's way of creating a sense of privacy among their users.

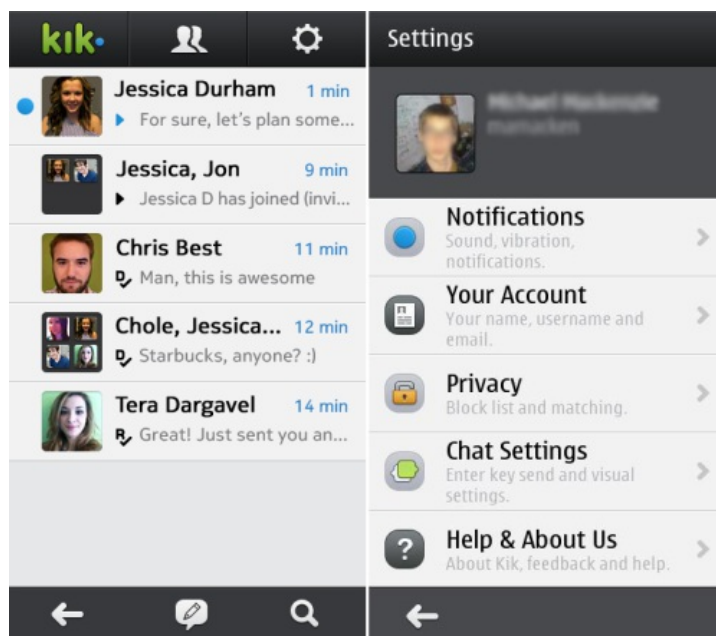
Inviting People to Kik

Kik users can use the Invite a Friend option to invite new people to connect with them on Kik. This can be done in several ways, but the method that poses the greatest risk to your child's privacy and safety is the ability to invite people via social networks. With the click of a button, your child can reach out to the public communities on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Tumblr (among many others) with the message "Kik me". No surprise here, "Kik me" is Kik's way of starting a new instant message conversation between the sender and the recipient, whoever they may be.

Kik users can also manually search for someone's Kik username and start a conversation that way, or they can dig into their phone's contact list to see who's already on Kik. Of course, the latter is a much safer approach to connecting with people on Kik since these people are already known to the user in some form or another.

Privacy and Parental Controls

Though Kik makes it easy to block other Kik users and ignore message notifications from new people, they offer zero parental controls, leaving it up to the child or teen to set these privacy settings on their own.



Another Kik safety concern that you should be aware of, and this is credited to Michael Sheehan's blog titled

["Parents Beware: Instagram & Kik Messenger Are a Dangerous Combination & What Social Dangers to Check For"](#), is the fact that kids and teens are sharing their Kik username on public social networks, like Instagram, through comments and profiles. As you can imagine, doing this opens the door to unwanted solicitations from Internet trolls, "pervs" and cyberbullies. In Michael's case, his daughter's friend received a request to chat on Kik via Instagram and the next thing she knew she was being asked to send naked photos of herself.

The reason I wrote this piece wasn't to bash Kik or to tell you that it's an unsafe app for your child or teen; whether you feel it's safe enough is entirely up to you and the maturity level of your child. But just like with any app or website that isn't specifically created for children (and thus COPPA compliant), the safety and privacy risks tend to be more prevalent. With that being said, if your child is 12 or younger, they shouldn't be using Kik at all. If your 13 or older teen prefers to use Kik instead of texting, and you're saving some money in the process, you don't need to delete the app from their phone, just have a very serious conversation with them about the safety risks involved with sharing their Kik username in public social networks and forums. While you're at it, take five minutes to make sure they're using the privacy settings.

The Internet will never be a totally "safe place" for our children, so we as parents have to remain vigilant and educated in order to take what we learn and pass it on to our kids.

