

Social Media and Youth Mental Health

A guide for parents and caregivers

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Youth age 14-24 shared advice for their peers in the study: “Youth Insight About Social Media Effects on Well/Ill-Being and Self-Modulating Efforts.” Each piece of advice is paired with practical step-by-step tips. This guide is not comprehensive, but it is a start.

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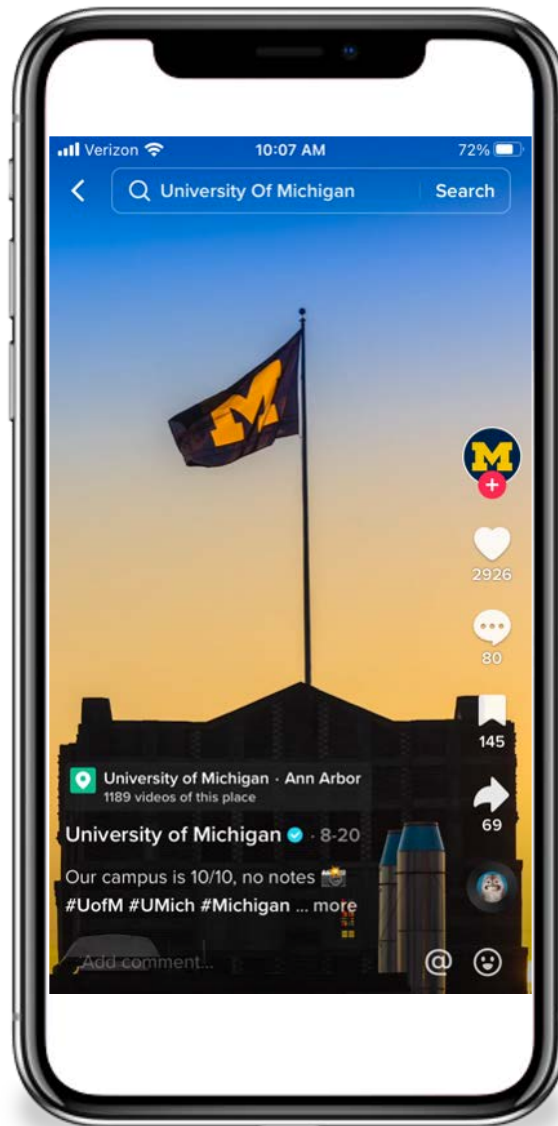
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Introduction

Social media comes with potential benefits and harms

Potential benefits:

- Maintaining friendships as well as making new ones
- Finding community and support for specific activities
- Sharing creative work such as art, humor, or music
- Learning new information
- Exploring and expressing oneself
- Finding safe spaces (especially for people who may not feel comfortable expressing themselves or sharing in person)



Potential harms:

- Cyberbullying
- Ability to purchase dangerous substances
- Sexual victimization and other dangerous interactions
- Exposure to dangerous content including hate speech, substance use, or speech that encourages violence
- Participating in dangerous “challenges”
- Privacy and safety concerns
- Compulsive use or use that interferes with sleep, exercise, homework, or family activities
- Low self-esteem due to unfair comparisons with others and over-valuing number of likes
- Exposure to misinformation
- Body image issues

Conversation Is Key

You want your child to come to you when something goes wrong online. Frequent, ongoing conversations about social media can help

Start with curiosity:

- What do you like about social media?
- What do you not like about social media?
- Have your friends ever found themselves in bad situations due to social media?
- Have you ever found yourself in a bad situation due to social media?
- What does social media add/take away from your life?
- Tell me about your online friends
- Do you have any fake accounts/multiple accounts on one platform?

Evoke “change talk” or their desire to make a change on social media:

- Have you ever thought about changing your social media use?
- What would have to happen for you to feel like you want to make a change to your social media use?
- What are some steps you could take towards changing ____ (the time spent on social media/the content viewed on social media etc.)?
- How can I help you with ____goal?

Conversation Is Key

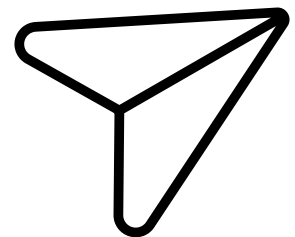
Tip: consider talking about something you saw or experienced on your own social media to start the conversation

Ask about cyberbullying and harmful content exposure:

- Have your friends ever had mean comments posted about them? (It can be helpful to first ask about friends)
- Have you ever had mean comments posted about you?
- Have you ever posted something mean yourself?
- Have you ever seen any pro-suicide, pro-self-harm, pro-eating disorder, racist or sexist content on social media?
- Have you ever seen any hate speech or speech that encourages violence on social media?

Check in about safety:

- Has anyone ever asked you to turn on vanish mode, delete a message or share your location?
- Have you ever seen any “challenges” on social media?
- How do you know if something is factual on social media?
- Have your friends ever spoken with adults on social media?
- Have you ever spoken with an adult on social media?



Cyberbullying

- **Cyberbullying** targets and perpetrators are more likely to have attempted suicide.
- Youth are **unlikely to share if they are being cyberbullied** and if they do share, it is most likely to be with a friend.
- Early ownership of a smartphone also increases a child's risk for being involved with cyberbullying as a target or perpetrator.
- **Ask if your kids have experienced any of the examples below. Encourage kindness online.**

Examples of cyberbullying include:

- Embarrassing or hurtful comments
- Photographs being posted online or sent to the person
- Rumors being spread about the person online
- Sexual comments or gestures being posted
- Threats of harm being sent to the target through messages
- Someone pretending to be the target online
- Nasty videos or webpages being posted about the target



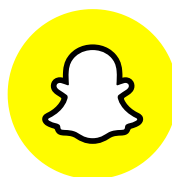
What Should You Do If Your Child Is Being Cyberbullied?

- **Safety first: is your child or anyone else is at risk of immediate harm?**
- Serious threats of harm or sharing of explicit pictures may require law enforcement involvement
- You can report images, videos, comments or posts to platforms themselves as a first step in the content getting taken down. If the platform does not take it down, you can try reporting the content from multiple accounts or contacting the platform directly.
- If bullying is also occurring at school, it may make sense for the school to be involved.
- **Page 22-23 of this book provides a step-by-step guide about how to report social media content.**

Substance Use

Youth can use social media to directly purchase/access drugs

- Purchasing of substances online is **illegal**- If your child has been purchasing substances online, report it on the platform, to the DEA and to local authorities.
- To report to the DEA go to: <https://www.dea.gov/submit-tip>. This helps other families.
- The Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act of 2008 Amends the Controlled Substances Act to prohibit the delivery, distribution, or dispensing of a controlled substance that is a prescription drug over the Internet without a valid prescription.
- This can occur through Snapchat, Instagram, Telegram, Discord and Gaming among others
- A wide variety of substances may be purchased illegally through social media. It is possible that any substance purchased illegally could contain Fentanyl (a potent opiate) which could cause respiratory depression and death. Other substances can also cause potentially fatal respiratory depression or potentially fatal cardiac problems on their own.
- It can be lifesaving to keep Narcan in the house. It is administered by spraying it in the nose of someone who is thought to be experiencing an opioid overdose.
- SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders. The number is: 1-800-662-HELP (4357).
- They also have an online treatment locator or you can send your zip code via text message: 435748 (HELP4U) to find help near you.
- If you are concerned your child might be using substances, talk with your pediatrician and seek treatment early.



Harmful Ideologies On Social Media

Just as hate speech, racism, sexism, misogyny and violence exist offline, they are also present online. It is important to talk about these topics. Because online spaces can be anonymous and immediate in-person reactions or consequences are absent, people may be more likely to make harmful comments or content online than offline.

Historically, persistently, or systemically marginalized (HPSM) youth may be exposed to **bullying, discrimination and negative stereotypes** online. This can contribute to depression, anxiety or trauma related symptoms.

However, social media may also facilitate valuable connection to peers with **shared identities, experiences, or interests** that are otherwise absent in their local communities.

“Manosphere” content may be delivered especially to young boys/men on social media. This content often offers an extreme description of masculinity and can even lead to violent ideology. This content can fuel interpersonal problems, other mental health challenges or even behavior that is dangerous to others.

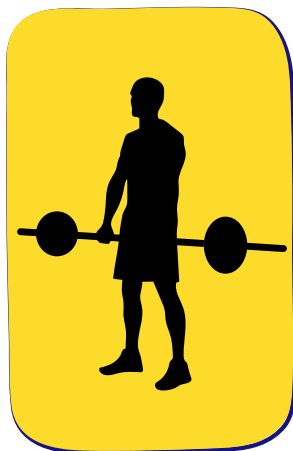


“Manosphere” ideology involves being “red-pilled” or “awakened” to the idea that the world favors women over men- creating a dangerous hostility towards women. This ideology also creates harmful standards for what men should strive for (invulnerability and dominance).

Aesthetic Ideals On Social Media

It is important to talk about **beauty/aesthetic ideals** encountered on social media. Filters and AI make this worse. It is important to call out bias and racism and to have thoughtful discussions about this topic. Pro-eating disorder content on social media can be particularly harmful.

TIP: Refreshing the For You Page or Explore Page can help if your child's algorithm becomes filled with harmful content including pro-eating disorder or diet culture content. (See pages 17 and 19). This guide will also share other ways to customize content.



Practical Tip: Turn Off Like Count

Advice From Young People

01

Things on social media are not real

"Don't believe everything you read and remember you are looking only at peoples highlights, not real life"

04

Don't forget about "real life"

"Social media is a fantastic tool to keep in touch with people and learn about and participate in communities of your interest. Make sure it's not a substitute for being with people, or actually participating in your interests"

02

People only post the best parts of their lives or photos are edited

"Not everything is real, it's just what people want you to see"

05

Don't overvalue it

"Not to get too invested in it emotionally and mentally"

03

Don't base your self-worth from it

"Don't place yourself-worth on it or assume that others' posts are accurate to their lives"

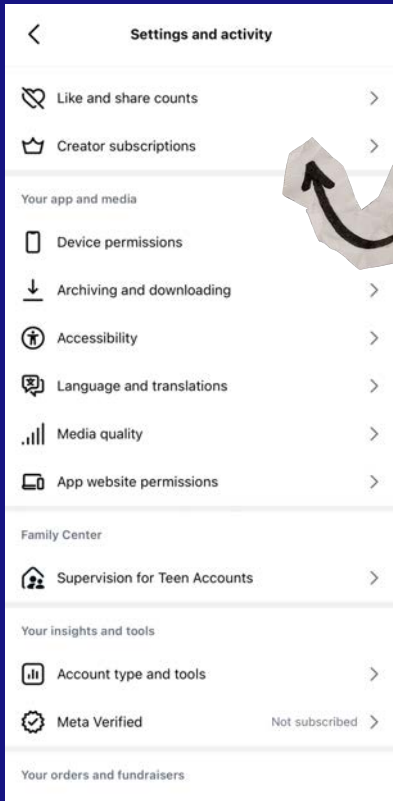
06

Don't take it too seriously

"Take everything with a grain of salt and people are not who they appear to be on social media"



How To Turn Off Like Count On Instagram



Go to "Settings and activity"
and then click "Like and share counts"



Turn on "Hide like and share counts"

Now posts have no
number next to the
like icon!



Practical Tip: Take A Break With Disconnection or Deletion Strategies

Advice From Young People

07 Don't use social media/delete it/it is okay to not be on social media

"Just do not use social media. It does not make you happier, it does not make you closer to your friends, it just distracts you from your friendships. People will spend more time on social media than they will with their friends. A lot of my friends will even spend time on social media while we are hanging out, and it's disappointing because it's like "here I am in front of you, why are you on Instagram?"



Disconnection from devices

- Not using phones/devices in certain areas
- Putting phones/devices away during social gatherings/holidays
- Technology free times in routine



Disconnection from specific platforms or apps

- Deleting social media accounts
- Deactivating social media accounts
- Deleting the icon
- Hiding the app in a folder
- Tracking use



Disconnection from specific content, communication or features

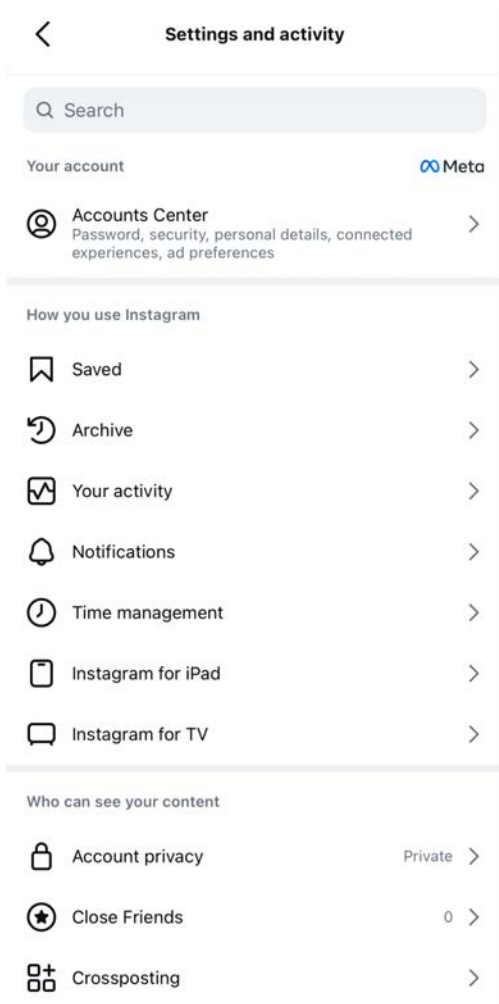
- Turning off notifications
- Using do not disturb/airplane mode
- Unfollowing or muting certain accounts
- Using content filters



Practical Tip: Set Time Limits & Become Aware of Time Spent

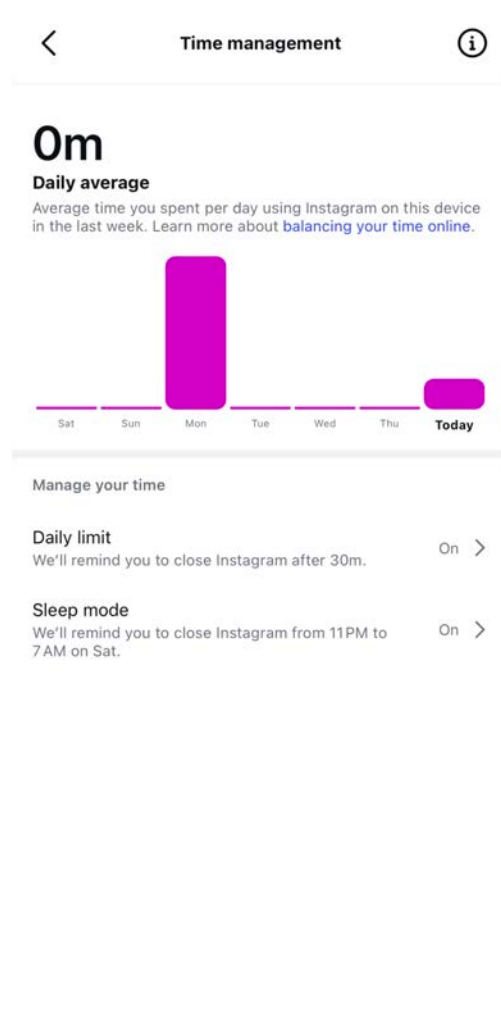
Advice From Young People

08 **Limit time spent**
"do not spend too much time or rely on it"



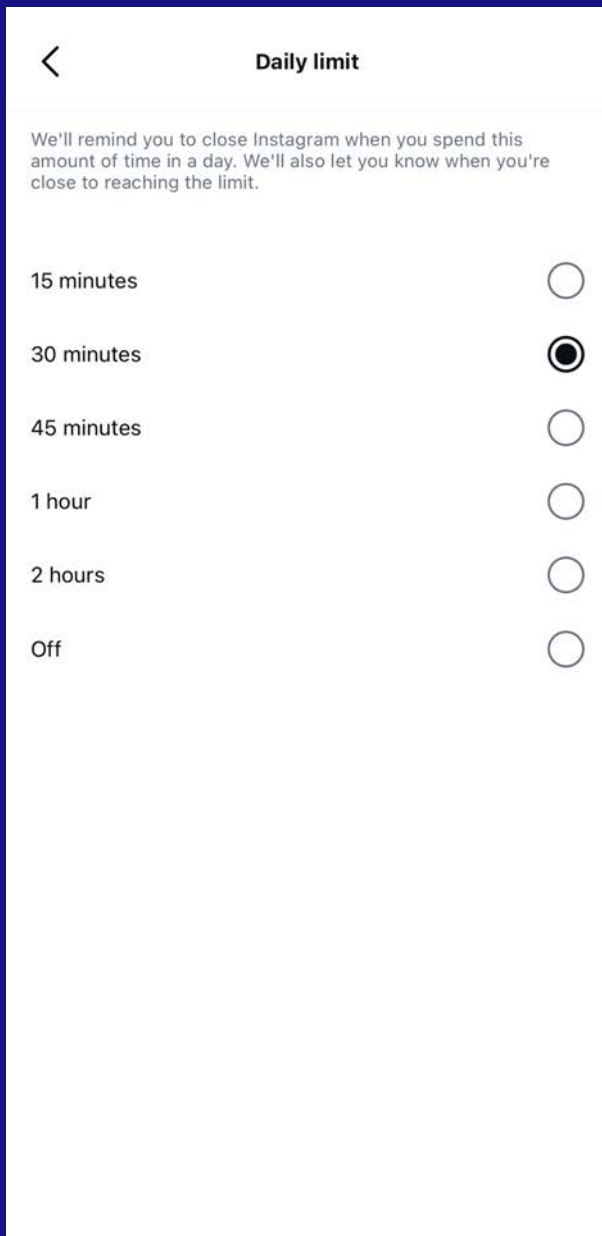
Go to "Settings and activity" and click "Time management"

09 **Don't become "addicted" or lose control**
"Don't get addicted be careful and limit your time on it"



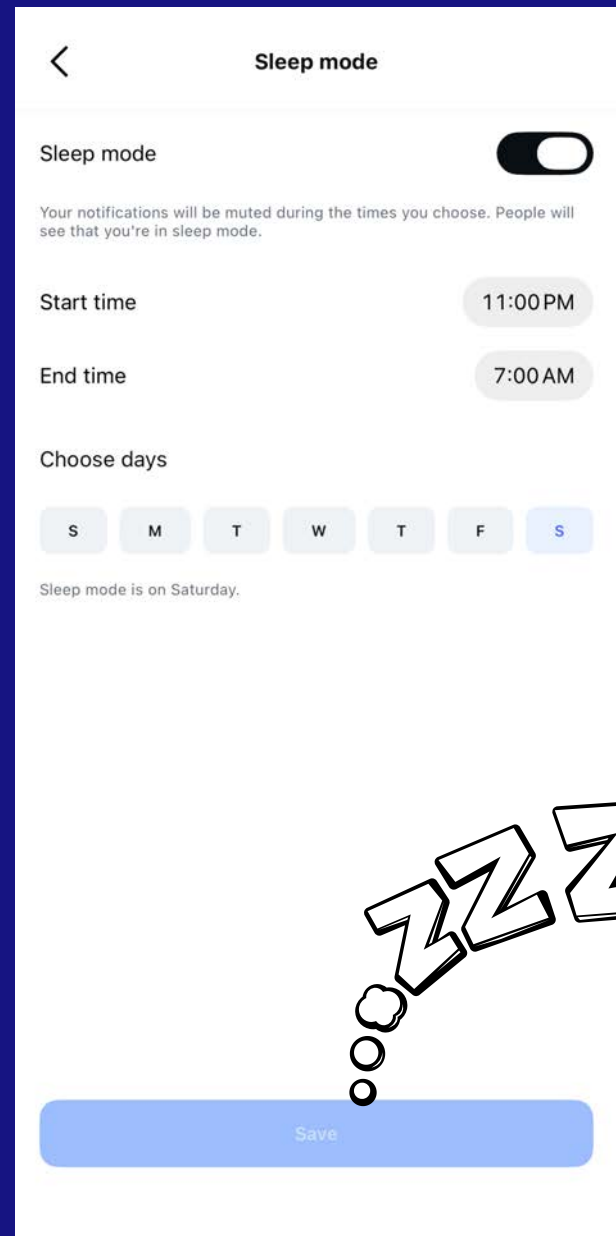
Check your daily average

More Time Settings On Instagram



The screenshot shows the 'Daily limit' settings screen. At the top, there is a back arrow and the title 'Daily limit'. Below the title, a message states: 'We'll remind you to close Instagram when you spend this amount of time in a day. We'll also let you know when you're close to reaching the limit.' There are six radio button options: '15 minutes', '30 minutes', '45 minutes', '1 hour', '2 hours', and 'Off'. The '30 minutes' option is selected, indicated by a filled black circle.

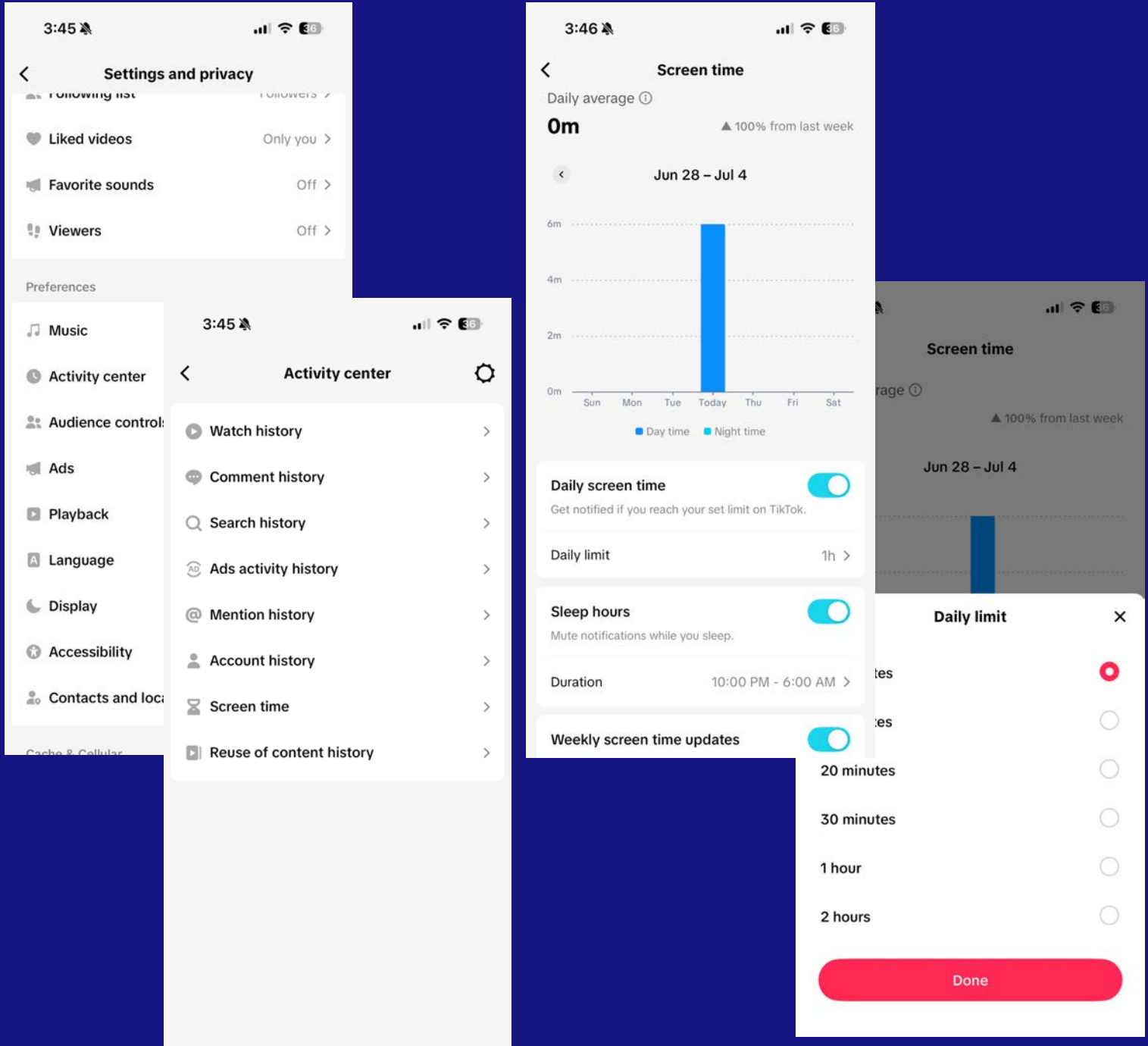
Set a daily limit



The screenshot shows the 'Sleep mode' settings screen. At the top, there is a back arrow and the title 'Sleep mode'. Below the title, there is a toggle switch for 'Sleep mode', which is currently turned off. A message states: 'Your notifications will be muted during the times you choose. People will see that you're in sleep mode.' There are two time selection fields: 'Start time' set to '11:00 PM' and 'End time' set to '7:00 AM'. Below these is a 'Choose days' section with a row of buttons for each day of the week: 'S', 'M', 'T', 'W', 'T', 'F', and 'S'. The 'S' button for Saturday is highlighted. A message below the days states: 'Sleep mode is on Saturday.' At the bottom right, there is a large, stylized 'ZZZ' graphic with three small circles leading to it. At the bottom center, there is a blue 'Save' button.

Configure "Sleep mode"

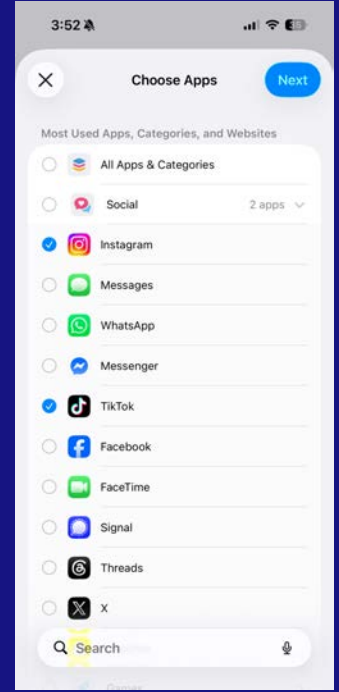
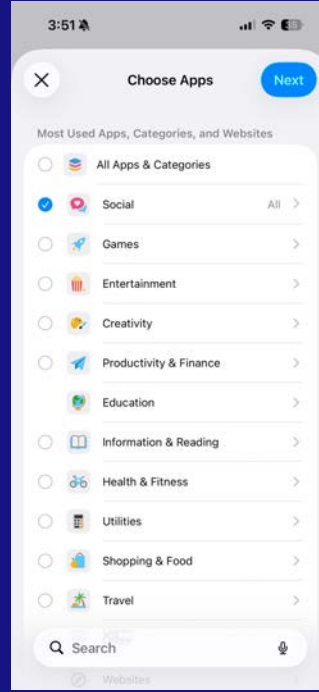
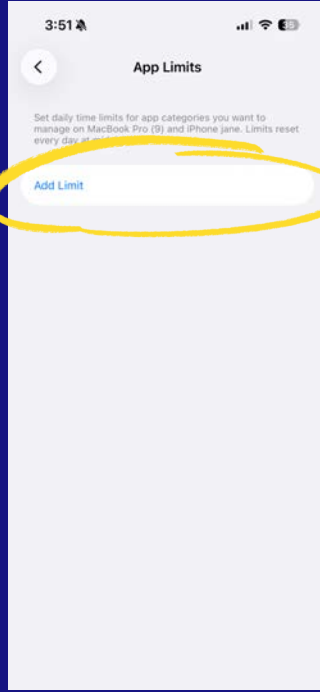
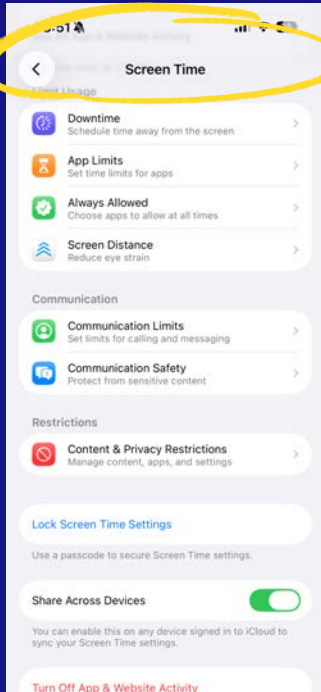
Time Settings On TikTok



Select "Activity center"

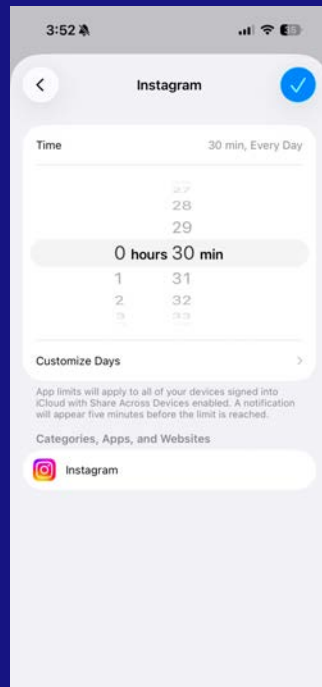
Configure daily screen time, sleep hours and weekly updates

Time Settings on iPhone

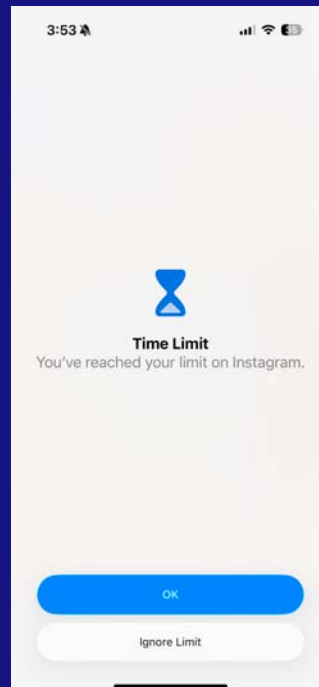


Choose all social media apps

Or just choose a few



Set the limit



When you try to open the app, this screen appears

Practical Tip: Refresh or Change The Algorithm

Advice From Young People

10

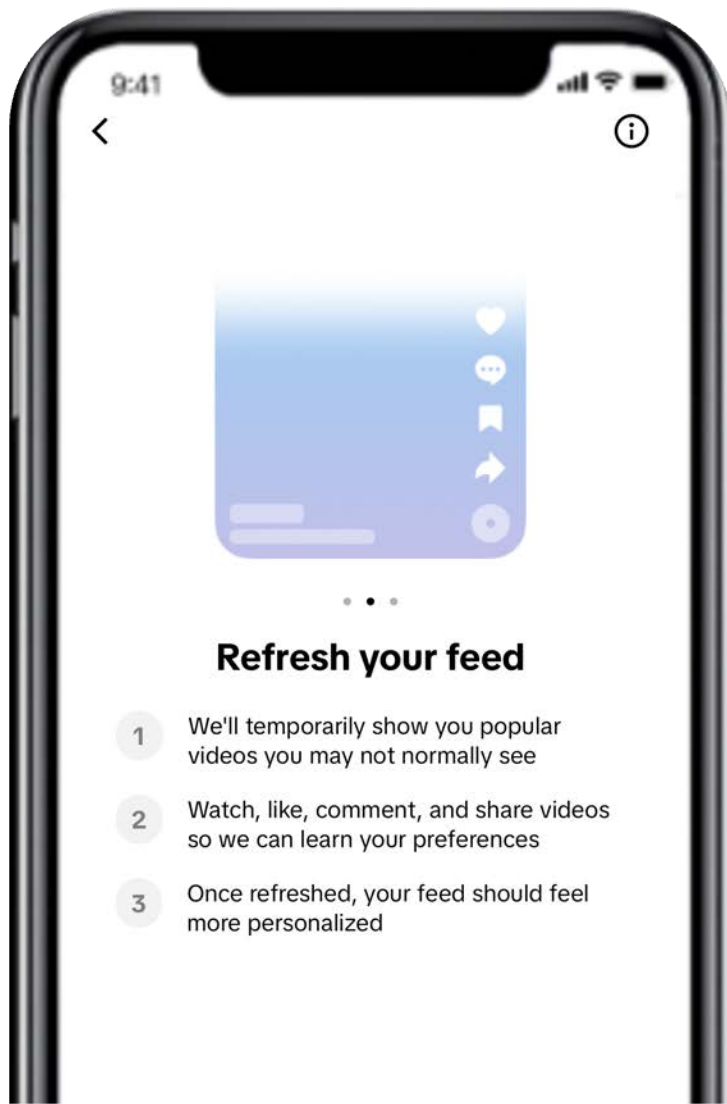
Limit unhealthy content consumption

"The advice I would give is to be careful on what you are watching and who you follow"

11

Be careful how you consume

"Just be aware of at what point it is benefiting you and at what point it is hurting you"

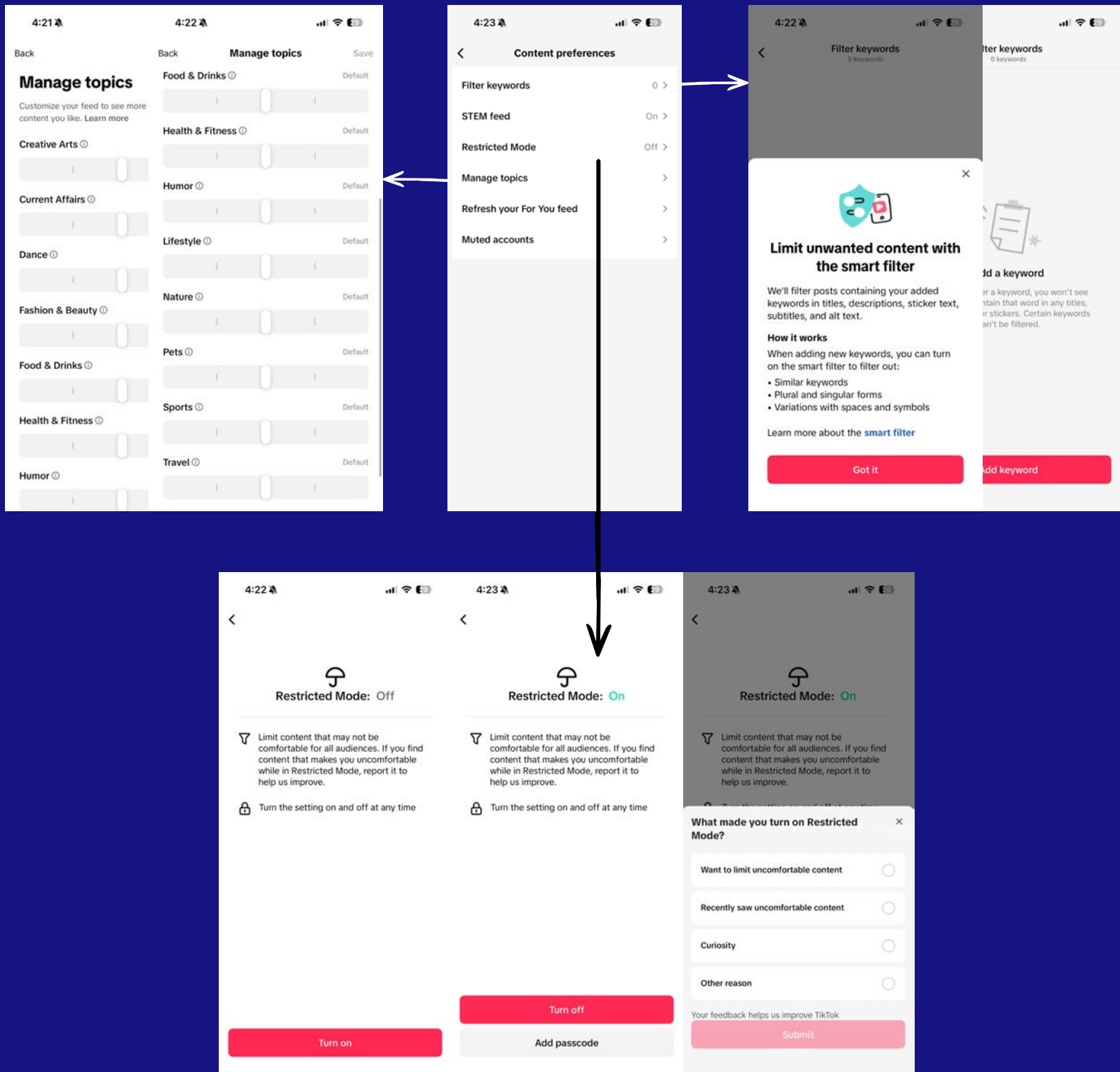


TikTok has a "refresh" feature that resets the For You feed to its original setting (as if you have just signed up for TikTok for the first time)

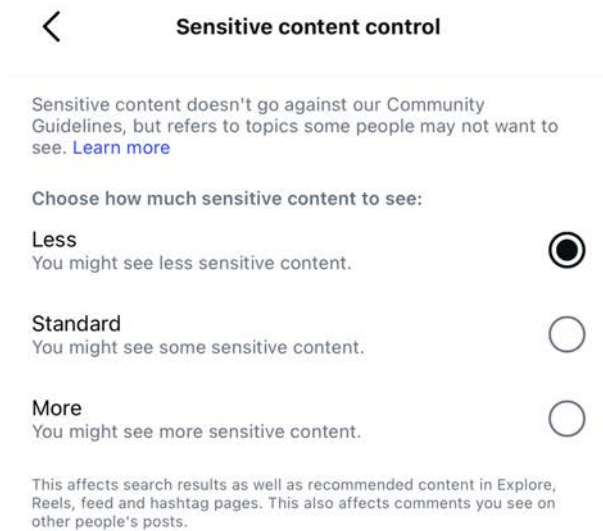
"Settings" →
"Content preferences" →
"Refresh Your For You feed"

This can be especially useful if the algorithm has become filled with pro-eating disorder, pro-suicide, or pro-self harm content.

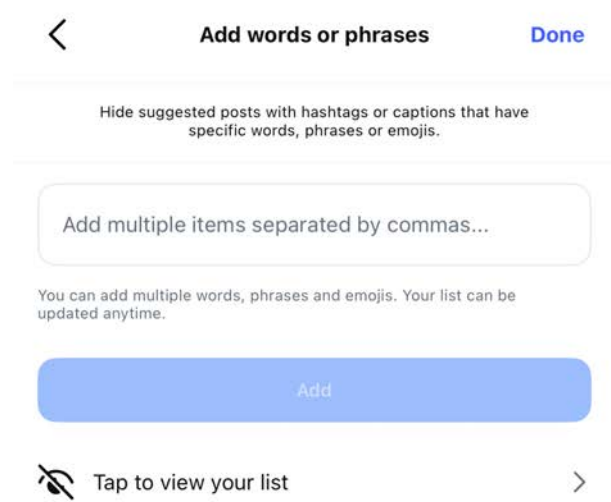
Customize Content on TikTok



Content Preferences on Instagram

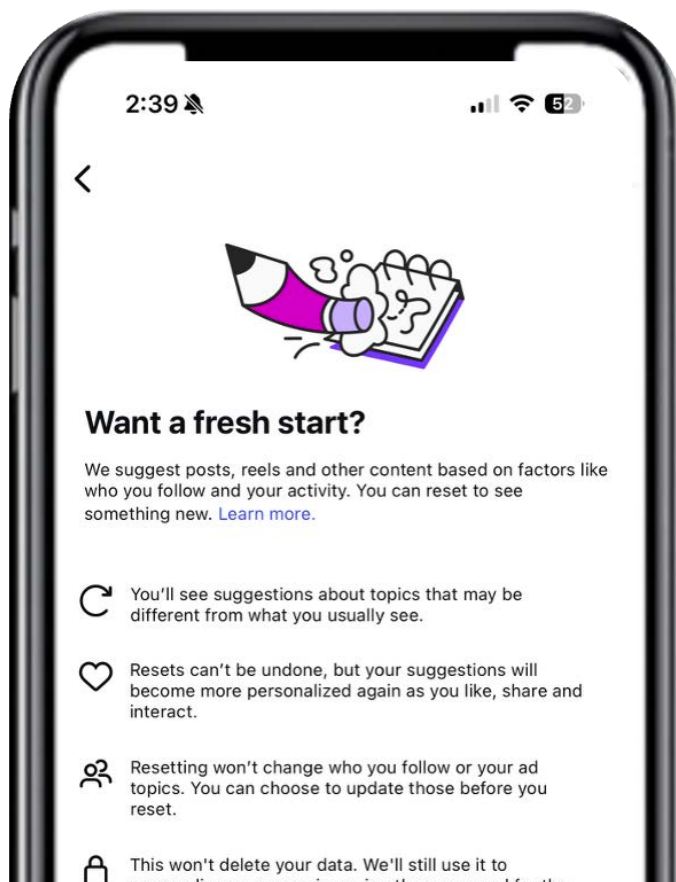


From the “Content Preferences” option, you can adjust this so less sensitive content is shown.



You can also click “Specific words and phrases” and add words as you see fit.

Refreshing The Explore Page on Instagram



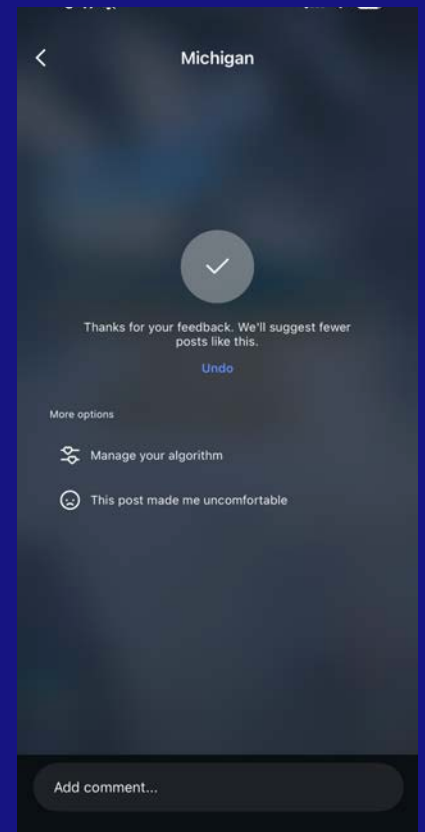
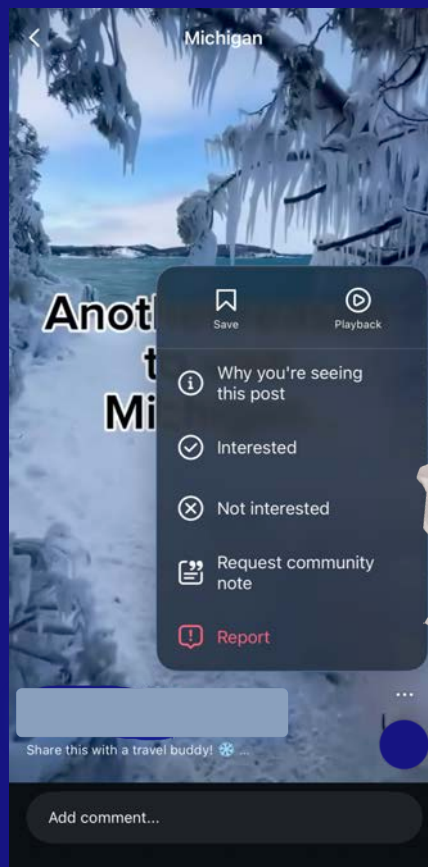
“Settings and activity” →
“Content preferences” →
“Reset suggested content”

Teach The Instagram Algorithm

What You Do & Do Not Want To See

Let's say we don't like this post that came up in the explore page on Instagram

Click the three dots in the bottom right corner and choose "Not interested"



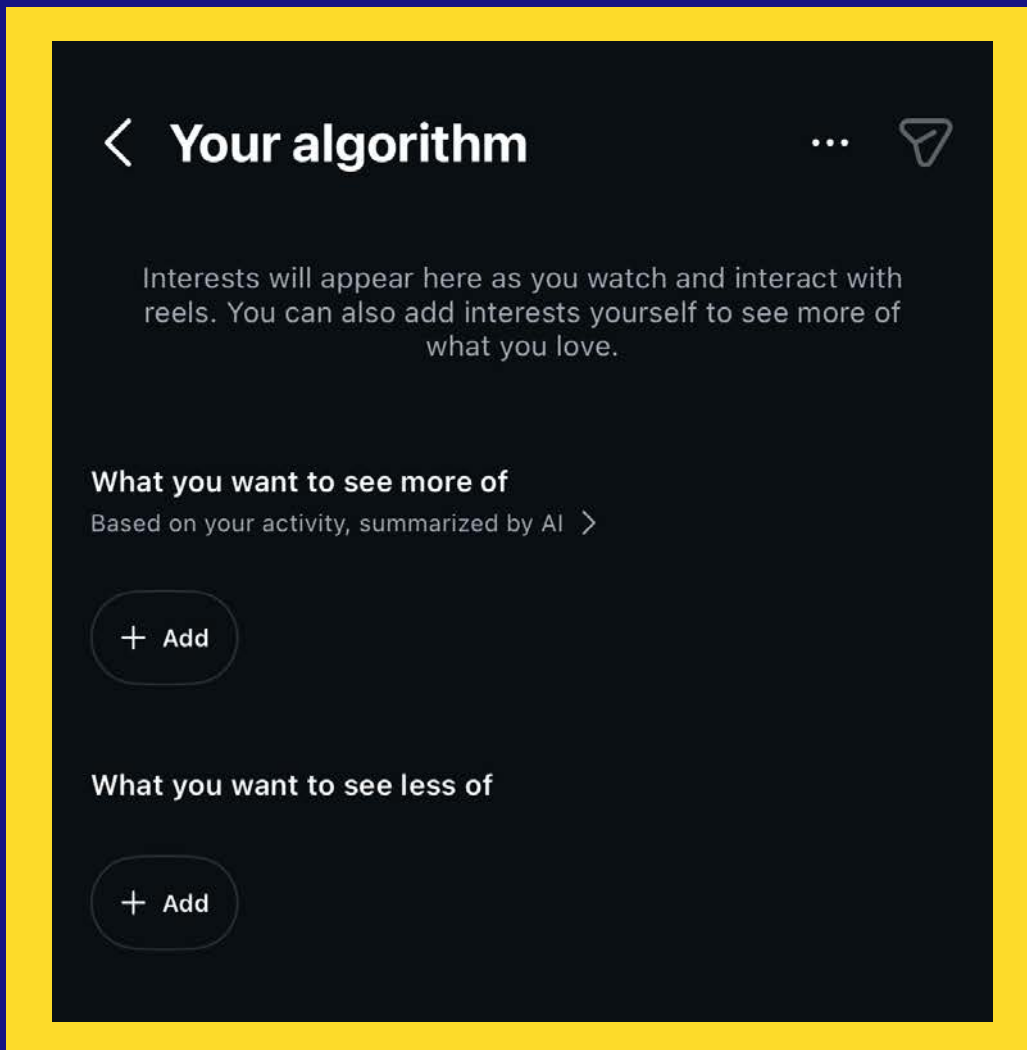
Now we will see less posts like that

Tell The Instagram Algorithm What You Do & Do Not Want To See

Customize your algorithm on Instagram:

“Content preferences” →
“Your algorithm”

Add what you want to see more and less of



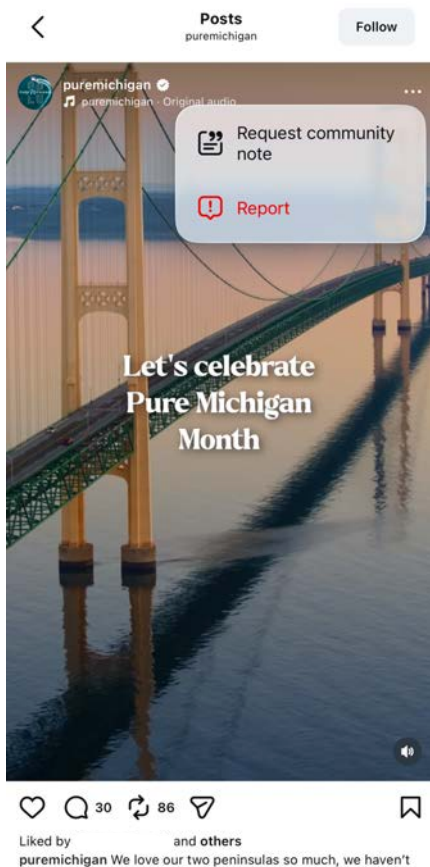
Practical Tip: Report

Advice From Young People

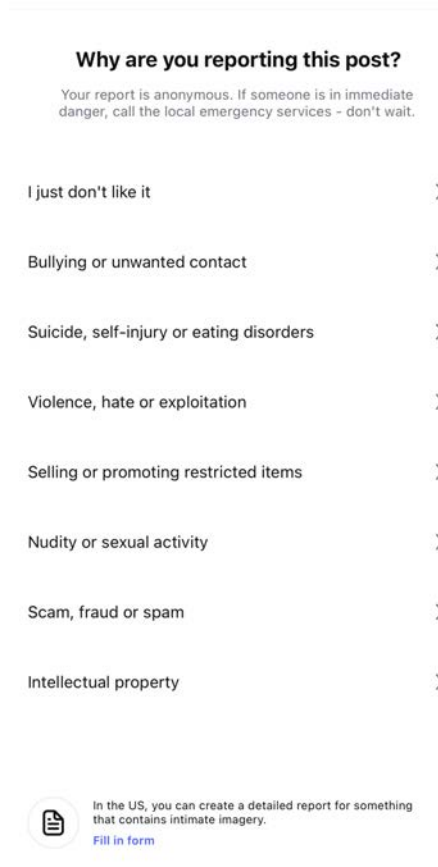
12

Don't bully others/start fights/let bullies affect you

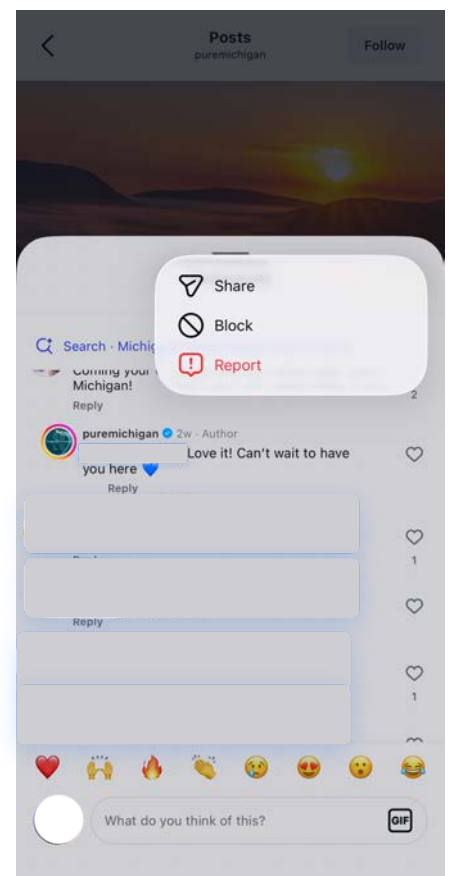
"...Think before you post. If this hurts someone's feelings then do not post it"



To report a post on Instagram, click the three dots in the upper right hand corner

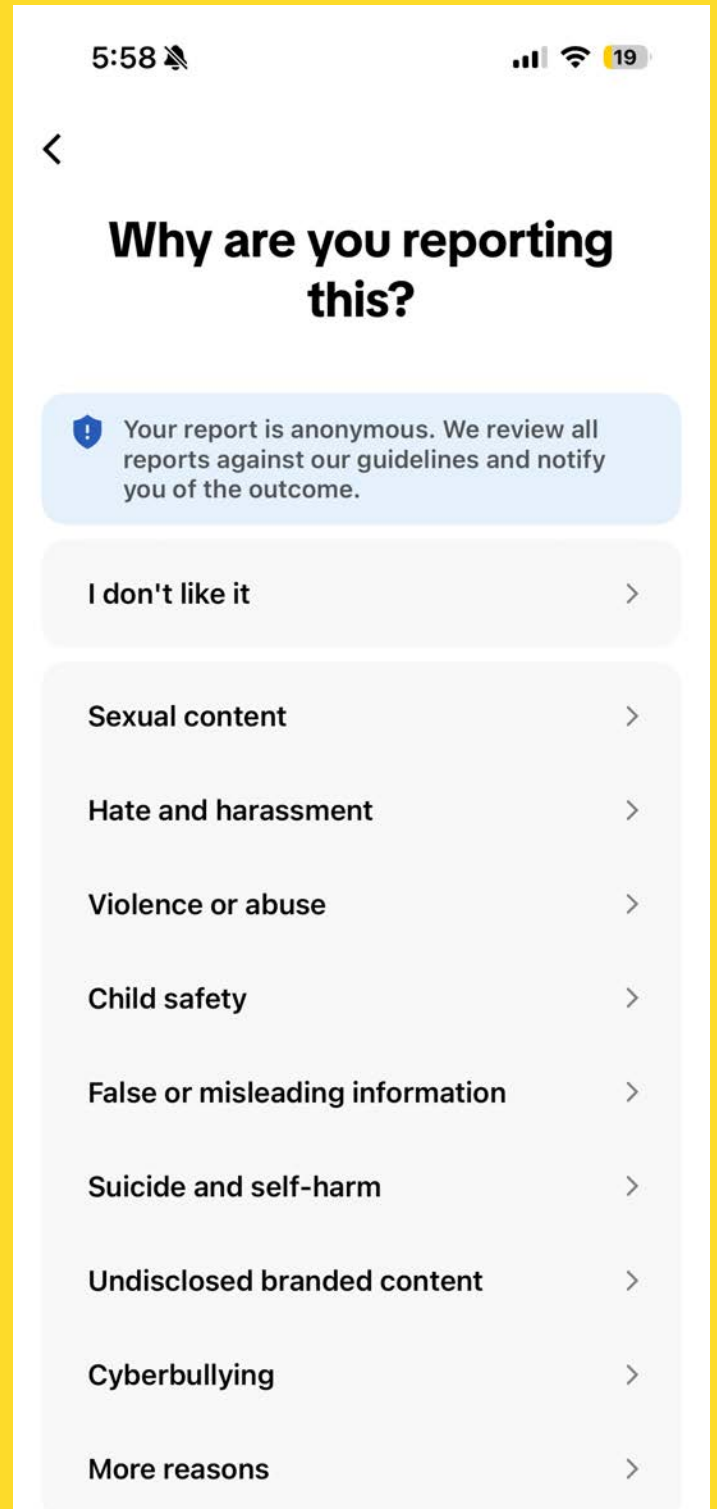
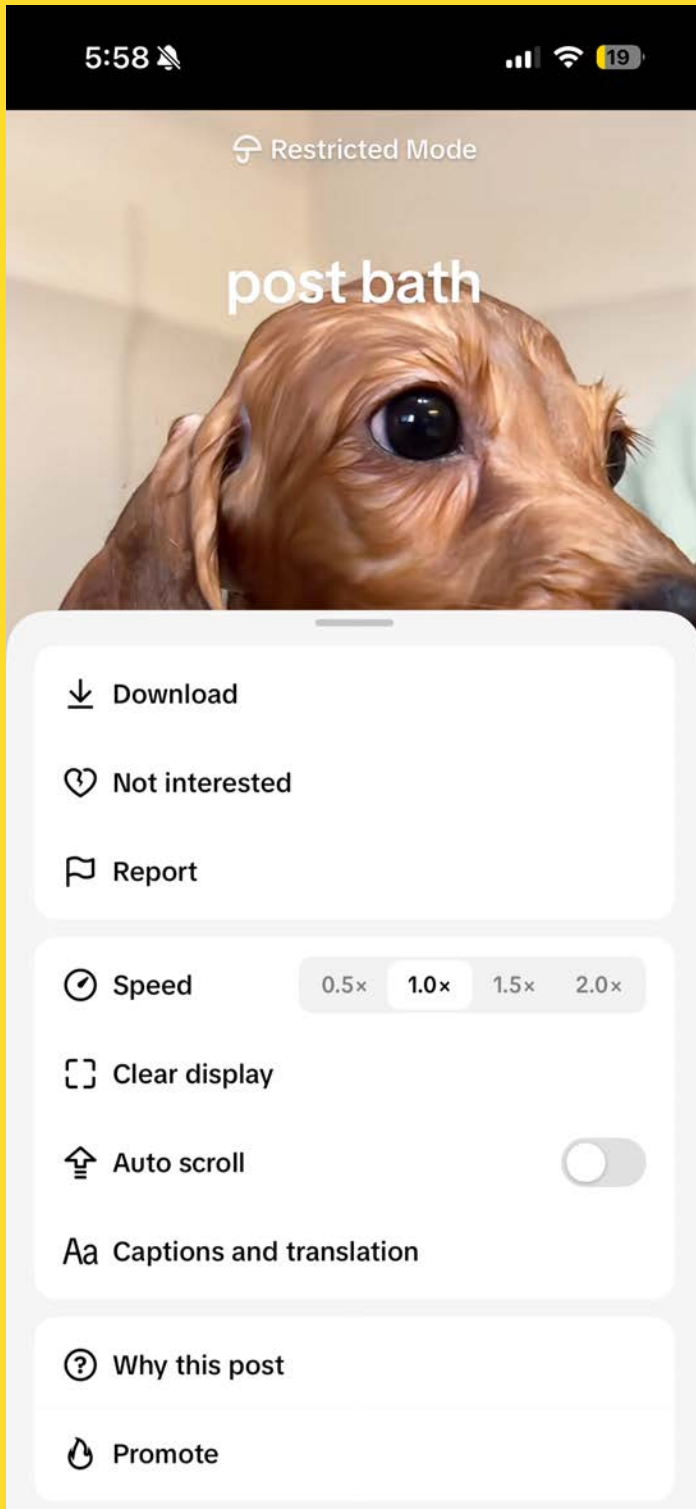


Indicate why you are reporting it



You can report individual comments too by holding down on the comment and clicking "Report"

Reporting on TikTok



Long press on the video or comment and select "Report"

Indicate why you are reporting it

Practical Tip: Snapchat Privacy Settings

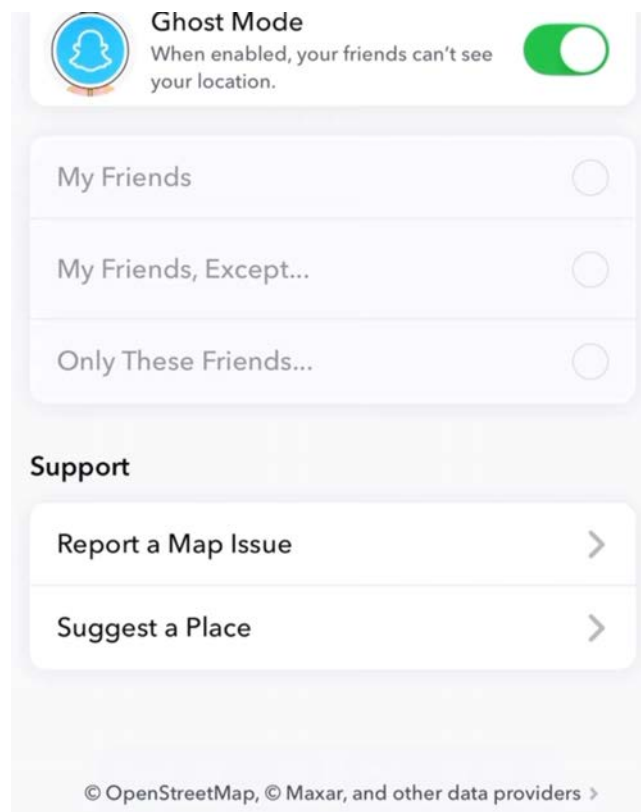
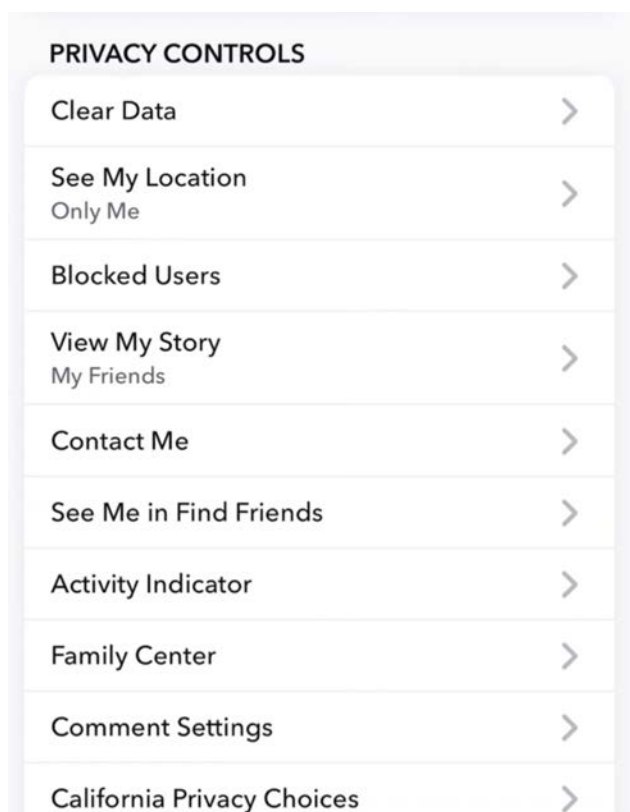
Advice From Young People

13 Don't give out your personal information & be careful who you interact with

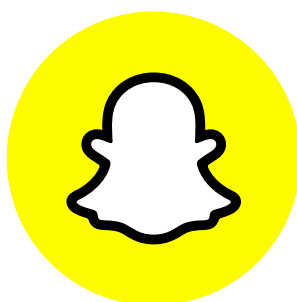
"The usual stuff like it being important to maintain privacy and not to share any personal info"

14 Everything you post is permanent

"Think before posting. Don't post something future you would regret"

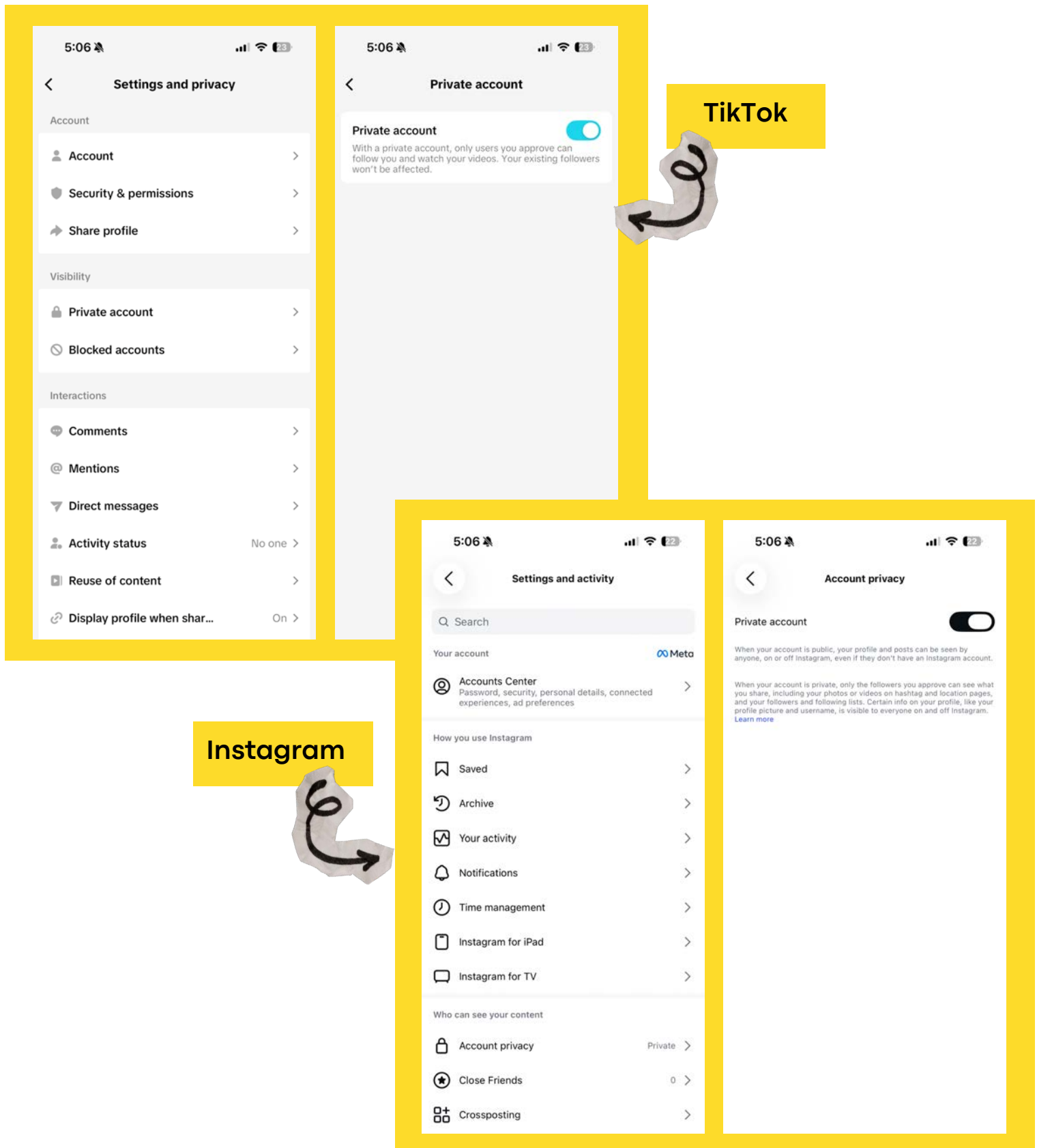


Go to Settings →
Privacy Controls →
See My Location



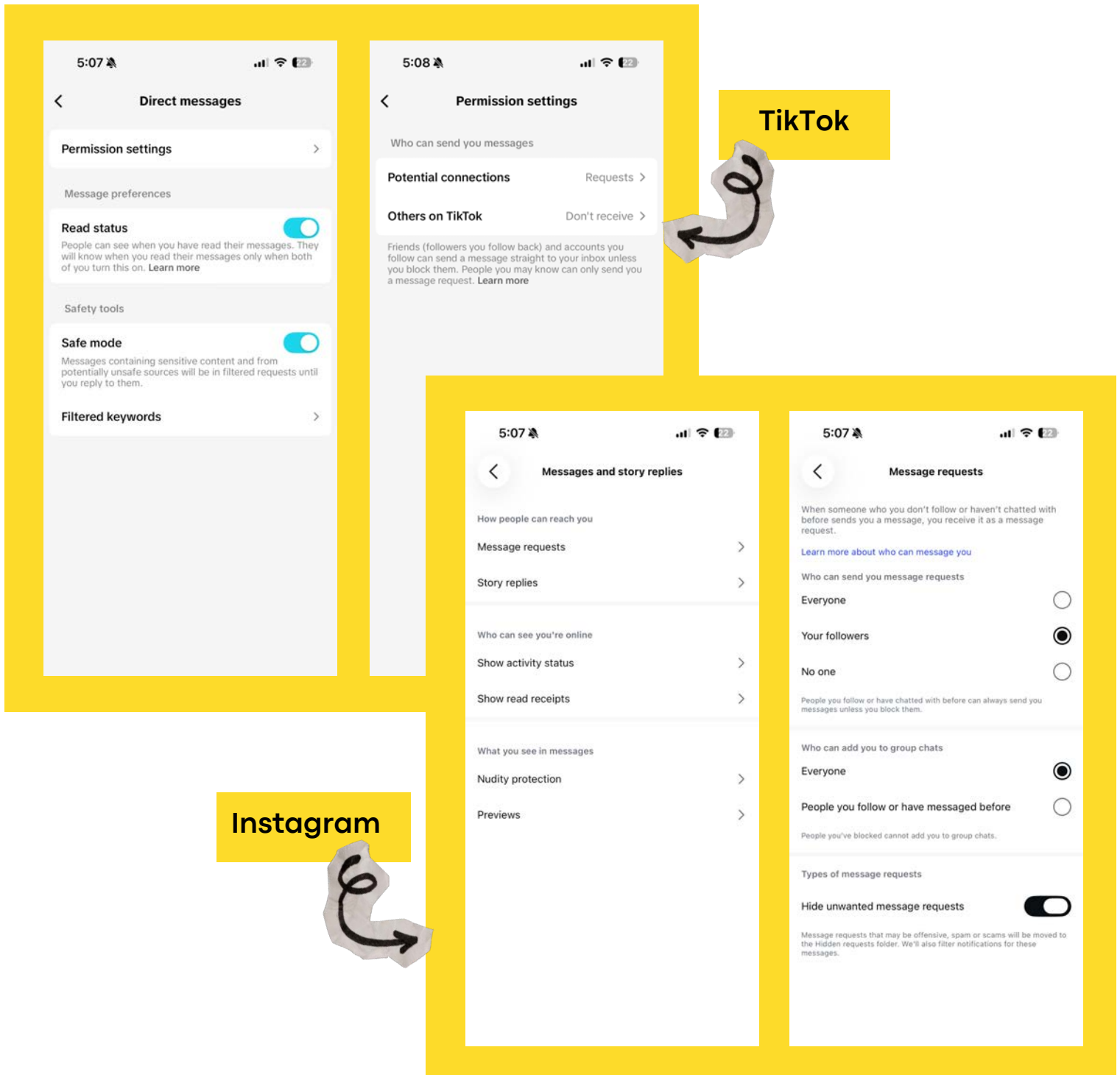
Turn Ghost Mode on so
people cannot see your
location

Practical Tip: Make Accounts “Private”



Practical Tip: Limit Direct Messaging With Unknown People

Adults can reach young people via direct messaging on social media. It is important to have boundaries about privacy and messaging to prevent inappropriate contact and other tragic outcomes.



Parental Controls

Parental controls are available in many platforms and some features may or may not be right for your family.

Consider these options as you balance safety and autonomy for your teen.

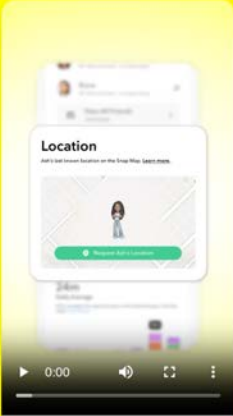
Snapchat

What is Family Center?

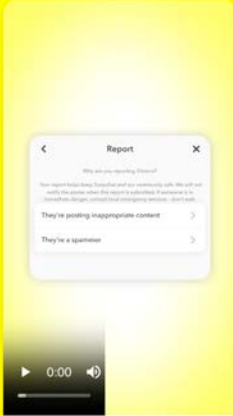
Family Center helps parents get more insight into who their teens are friends with on Snapchat, and who they have been communicating with, while still respecting their teens' privacy and autonomy. It's designed to reflect the way parents engage with their teens in the real world, where parents usually know who their teens are friends with and when they are hanging out, but don't eavesdrop on their private conversations.

FAMILY CENTER FEATURES FOR PARENTS

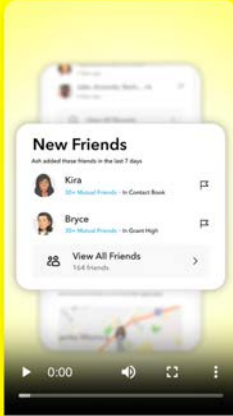
Learn how each Family Center feature works to help you stay connected and informed.



Share location as a family
Request your teen's location and share yours in return to stay



Report concerning accounts
Help your teen confidentially report accounts or file a report on



View your teen's friends
See existing and new friends, as well as how your teen may know



See who they're chatting with
Encourage your teen to connect only with people they know in real

<https://michmed.org/BDzAn>



Parental Controls TikTok



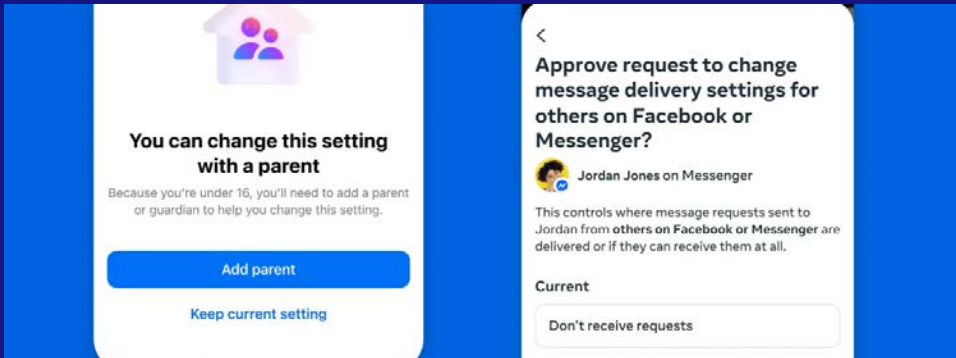
<https://michmed.org/QKrR9>

Family Pairing

Recognizing that every teen and every family is different, we offer Family Pairing, which allows parents and guardians to link their accounts with their teens to manage content, privacy, and well-being settings. It's simple to use and can be set up by parents with just a few clicks. Family Pairing includes features such as:

- Setting a screen time limit, which is customizable by the day of the week. When you set a screen time limit with Family Pairing, your teen needs to ask you for a one-time passcode to keep using TikTok after the limit is up.
- Customize your teen's For You feed using keywords. TikTok will filter out posts that contain the keywords that you choose by checking for them in the description of the post.
- Customize your teen's comment controls or completely turn off comments.
- Decide who can send messages or message requests to your teen.
- View who your teen is following on TikTok, and who follows them, along with accounts they blocked.
- Get an overview of your teen's privacy settings, such as their account visibility and who can comment on their posts. The settings shown here depend on your teen's age and the features available to them.
- Enable Restricted Mode to limit exposure to content that may not be comfortable for your teen.

Parental Controls Meta (Instagram/Facebook)



<https://michmed.org/DAmyA>

GET STARTED

Set up supervision together

Supervision is an optional feature that allows you to work with your teen to decide how much oversight you have over their Meta apps as a parent.

Step 1: Invite your teen Step 2: Adjust privacy and safety settings Step 3: Set up limits and boundaries 5

Step 1: Invite your teen

Start by inviting your teen to supervision. They'll need to accept before it's active — or they can request supervision instead.



Other Resources



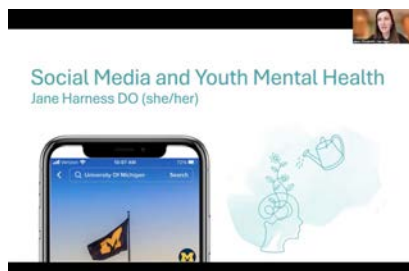
Children and Screens:
Great webinars and resources
<https://www.childrenandscreens.org/>



AACAP Social Media & Screen
Time Media Resource Center
<https://michmed.org/ydVqN>



AAP Center of Excellence on
Social Media and
Youth Mental Health
<https://michmed.org/qx3dr>



Social Media Talk on MFamily YouTube
<https://youtu.be/wLNUtbk8xiU>



Social Media Mini Course:
An online self-paced
course for youth themselves
<https://michmed.org/72VNX>

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