
Common Sense on Video Chatting

Better Than IM? Video Chatting Hits Home

We live in a connected world where it's easy to feel as if our far-away friends are right next door. Nothing makes this more true than having a face-to-face conversation with someone on the other side of the world. Video chatting is gaining in popularity and may bring up some sticky situations for parents.

Some facts

Video chatting — basically Instant Message (IM) with video — has become totally accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and a webcam.

All of the major IM programs support video chatting.

Video chatting is integrated into social networks like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

Most U.S. households with computers have webcams.

Video chat rooms are easy to find on the Internet and are very often sex-related.

What is video chatting?

It's not enough anymore for kids to type text messages to one another. They want a visual. Video chatting allows you to see and hear whom you're talking to. All you need is a webcam and a computer with an Internet connection. You log into your IM or social network and enable the video chatting feature — or use a program like Skype, Windows Live Messenger, or TokBox.

Why it matters

Unlike regular IM, where kids sometimes talk a big game, you can't be anonymous with video chatting. The fact that your face is right there for all to see might inhibit kids from the rudeness or dishonesty that sometimes invades online interactions. But it's not just your kid's face that's on show. Anything else can be, too. Kids love an audience, and they sometimes get bold and act out when they have one. That means that some behavior — and some body parts — that you don't want your kids exhibiting could end up on display.

Parent tips for all kids

- » **Set age limits.** Just because a laptop comes with a camera doesn't mean your kid has to use it. Make sure that any chatting with grandparents or a traveling parent takes place under your watch. And keep young kids away from any unaccompanied chatting.
- » **Understand the technology.** Open an account yourself, and get your whole family connected. If your kid views the program as a way of staying in touch with family, there might be less risk of misuse with friends.
- » **Model good video chat behavior.** Show kids how to be polite and respectful, and let them know that's the behavior you expect when they're video chatting with their friends.
- » **Use privacy settings.** Just like other communication tools like Facebook and Yahoo Messenger, most video chat programs come with privacy settings. TokBox, for example, has three settings — all of which your kids should enable. You can set it to allow only contacts from your existing friend list. You can also hide yourself from searches so that no one can search your name and contact you. And you can hide your friend list, which protects your friends' identities. That said, nothing keeps your children perfectly safe, so you need to keep an eye on their video chatting activities by allowing video chatting only in public rooms
- » **No sexy stuff.** Video chatting is widely used on the Internet for sexual purposes. Once your webcam and account are set up, it's easy to stumble onto these sites. You can use browser controls to restrict what sites your kids can visit, and you can educate them about never going there. Internet sex laws are being enacted all over the country; you don't want your kid subject to them.
- » **Be careful.** A lot of kids use video chatting as an innocent way to hang out with friends, but it can be a slippery slope. Kids shouldn't post anything that could get them into trouble. Video programs allow you to record short videos, and once something is captured on video, it can last forever — and can be broadcast and viewed by vast anonymous audiences. Steer clear of instant video-chatting sites like chatroulette, which instantly connect you with strangers (who are typically trolling for sexual encounters).

Focus on the positives

- » **Learning together.** Kids can use video chat to work with other kids on school projects, puzzle out homework assignments, and, if their classroom is equipped, log in on sick days to learn long distance. (Check out our tips for using Facebook for homework.) These sessions can drag on, though, so set time limits before kids log on.
- » **Hello mudda, hello fadda.** Believe it or not, summer camps are beginning to use video chat to stave off homesickness (and maybe to keep parents away). For long-distance travel or the summer-camp blues, video chat can help families stay in touch when they miss each other.
- » **Birds of a feather.** Video chat allows clubs to get together to share news without having to leave home. If your kid is in a club, they can share photos and videos and refer others to Web sites that relate to the club. Social networking sites like Ning let you create a circle of friends interested in the same subject.
- » **Set time limits.** Video chat can be a time sucker, so, as with much online activity, be sure to get your children to agree on how long they will spend video chatting.