

# Common Sense on Instant Messaging

## Faster than a speeding email

Your children’s fingers are furiously clicking away on their phone or keyboard. But what are they saying, and whom are they talking to? Kids have become more and more used to having ways to instantly communicate with their friends, and parents are often left trying to keep up.

## Some facts

74% of girls aged 12-17 use instant messaging vs. 62% of boys (*Norton, 2007*).

40% of kids that have been cyberbullied say it happened through instant messages (*Cyberbullying411.org, 2007*).

28% of teens chat with people they don’t know in the offline world, and girls chat with strangers more than boys do (*McAfee, 2010*).

## What is instant messaging?

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 cell 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. Many of these services now offer video chatting, which allows users to talk to each other face to face by using webcams. This can be a great way to stay in touch with distant friends and relatives. But video chatting also makes conversations feel much more personal, and kids can get into uncomfortable situations if the person on the other end wants them to do something they might not do in person.

## Why it matters

Starting in middle school, IM becomes a major way that kids communicate. It can make them feel connected to their friends, but it also can be a major time waster and homework interrupter. IM is a really powerful and fast way to spread information, and its anonymity 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 someone’s confidence from an IM conversation and cut and paste it into another one and send it to the world.

## Parent tips for all kids

- » **Keep them safe.** Make sure that kids know never to 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. Friends of friends of friends can have motives you don't know or understand. Remind your kids to feel a healthy skepticism about anyone introduced by friends (or friends of friends) — people they don't really know. Consider reviewing buddy lists with your kids periodically to make sure they can tell you something personal about each buddy on that list.

## Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **We don't recommend that elementary school kids use IM.** They need to develop social maturity in the real world first.

## Parent 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 their chats. And if your kids are using visual chat make sure you know the person on the other end and that your child and their chatting buddy are behaving properly.
- » **Set use rules.** Set firm rules about time and place. IM can be addictive, and it's easy to lose hours chatting with a friend when you should be doing other things. Reinforce rules about online behavior: no sexual talk, no trash talk, and no rumors.
- » **Talk about digital cheating.** When some kids use IM as a virtual study group, it's tempting and easy for them to cheat by giving or getting answers. They may not think of this as cheating, but it is. If your kids are using IM while doing their homework, it's a good idea for you to check in to make sure they are being responsible.
- » **Keep IM at home.** Minimize IM by keeping it on a computer. Once it's on your kids' phones, they are never going to be disconnected.

## Parent tips for high school kids

- » **Have standards.** However they are communicating, kids have to know what is and isn't OK. 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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