

# A Parent Guide to Better Protect your Child from Online Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking



# PARENTS, WE KNOW HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO YOU TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN



You may be managing uncertainty and fear when it comes to the online world, combined, perhaps, needing to take care of the logistics of providing for your household. You are trying to educate your children and keep your entire family safe. Keeping your family safe also means making sure your kids are practicing safe habits online. Whether it's attending virtual classes, keeping in touch with friends or just playing, most youths are spending an increasing amount of time online. You are not alone in wanting to keep your children safe. The risk of online

exploitation is real. This guide is meant to inform and empower you with the tools you need to ensure that your children are staying safe online by (1) explaining the forms of online sexual exploitation, (2) giving you the warning signs, (3) providing information on how you can control the technology your children are using, and (4) helping you talk to your kids about these issues.

## WHAT IS ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

Online sexual exploitation includes recruiting, live-streaming, consuming child sexual abuse material (formerly known as "child pornography"), and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes. While the internet has been a positive catalyst for innovation, never before has it been easier for traffickers to hide their identity, make contact with children, film, and profit from images of abuse. Traffickers also use the internet to inspire each other to commit further crimes related to online sexual exploitation. Some of the ways in which this exploitation can happen are discussed below.



## UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

**GROOMING** is when a trafficker (or a separate person working for the trafficker, possibly closer to the victim's age) builds an emotional connection with a target child in order to gain trust for the purposes of eventual sexual exploitation. This may also be referred to as the "loverboy tactic" or "Romeo pimping," in which the groomer is seducing the victim. The trafficker wants the target to fall in love with them. Sometimes a runaway youth or a youth experiencing homelessness meets someone out in public who appears to be kind and supportive. Or the initial contact is made online. The trafficker will present themselves as everything the child has ever dreamed of, offering care and support. In fact, most sex trafficking survivors have reported viewing their traffickers as a significant other. This is the honeymoon stage, as traffickers want their target to become emotionally attached.

Youths are more likely to fall victim to a trafficker's ploys because of emotional wounds that the trafficker promises to heal. Traffickers relate to victims' desires for family and belonging. As a groomer builds trust, they can more readily identify a youth's vulnerabilities - collecting information about family and home life, main support systems (or lack thereof), addictions, desires, self-esteem - to use against the child later in order to exploit him or her.

Grooming can be a fast or slow process depending on the victim, taking 6 days or 6 months, but eventually, the child is drawn in and becomes intimately and emotionally connected to their exploiter.

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**CATFISHING** is when a person creates a false online identity to deceive a victim into developing a relationship, often romantic. A "catfish" watches what a child posts on social media sites such as Instagram, TikTok, Discord, SnapChat, or Facebook, in order to plan the best way to manipulate the child. Perpetrators may offer opportunities for modeling, traveling, fame or wealth. To the victim, this newfound friend can appear like a dream come true: until the catfish begins making demands, sometimes subtle, sometimes threatening.

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**SEXTING** is the transmission of a sexually-explicit image via any digital device. This should be on parents' radar both between your child and people they already know in real life (friends, romantic partners and even adults in their life) as well as people they do not ("wrong numbers," somebody they met gaming or on social media).

PACT's youth instructors have observed that sexting has become normalized by tweens and teens, who might see and use it as a form of flirtation. Young people sometimes send explicit images in the hopes of getting the attention they desire, and because of a normal desire to feel wanted.


Even if children have normalized this as "innocent" or "common," sexting can have serious negative consequences for young people, such as anxiety from posted content (i.e. pictures/videos), friendships ending, online arguments, fights, arrests, and violence, exploitation, and comparing themselves unfavorably to others. Once an image is released to the Internet, it is difficult, if not impossible, to remove it. In one disturbing trend, students who privately receive explicit pictures will "expose" a peer by creating a social media account dedicated to these photographs.

With all of this being said, it is important to not shame young people who may have sexted explicit images or may have been "exposed" for sexting. Shaming young people will only create a dynamic where they may feel even more alone after being violated in such a way. Instead, it is important to talk to young people about the potential consequences of sexting. If a young person has sexted, lead with empathy. Ask the child what you can do to make them feel safe again (within your power). Check in with the young person. Create a circle of care such as ensuring they can speak to a social worker at school or a therapist. If you suspect that the person on the other end of the picture is a sexual exploiter/trafficker- contact the proper authorities.


In addition to the possible psychological and reputational damage caused by sexting, there are also serious legal consequences. If an individual under 18 sends a sexually explicit message or photograph, this is still viewed under the law as creating and distributing child sexual abuse material. Whether an individual creates, distributes, or views child sexual abuse material, it is a crime. Sexting can also give rise to other forms of online abuse, particularly when solicited and received by a catfish.




**SEXTORTION** is a form of blackmail: when a catfish or other predator threatens to spread sexual images of someone unless the victim agrees to send even more sexually explicit images or be filmed performing sex acts. A child who had been persuaded to send one image is often forced to send dozens more for fear of discovery by their friends, schoolmates and, especially, families. Rather than tell a parent, some victims of sextortion have declining grades, exhibit depression, and engage in self-harm.



**IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE** occurs when someone publicly shares private pictures that had been meant only for them — often after a breakup. It is more inaccurately known as “revenge porn,” and occurs when an angry ex-partner wants to control the other person in the relationship. In PACT’s school outreach and training, students have reported being subjected to this form of abuse by an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. Unlike sextortion, image-based sexual abuse might not demand that the victim do anything further - the abuser wants to “punish” the victim. Perpetrators are looking to inflict maximum harm through humiliation.



**CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING** occurs when someone under 18 years old is bought or sold for sexual purposes. Children are also victims of sex trafficking when they engage in sex in return for basic needs such as food, shelter, safety, or pocket money to purchase consumer goods. To commercially sexually exploit a child is a crime under both federal and state laws. A child can never, under any circumstances, consent to be sold for sex (one reason why the term “child prostitute” is no longer used). Traffickers can be male or female. Traffickers may even use students to recruit other children. In all instances, abusers are exploiting the vulnerabilities of the child.



# SIGNS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OR TRAFFICKING

Here are some common indicators of trafficking and online exploitation. Please keep in mind there is no one indicator for trafficking and sometimes there are simple explanations for suspicious behavior. Use a totality of indicators and resources to determine if your child is currently being exploited or being groomed for exploitation.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Frequently exits and enters the home despite prohibitions on travel
- Works excessively long hours for a job (virtually or outside of the home) you do not know much about
- Depression, anxiety or unusual fears, or a sudden loss of self-confidence
- Has injuries or other signs of abuse that they don't want to explain
- Fears authority figures
- Unexplained sums of money transferred into accounts such as Venmo, CashApp, and PayPal
- Disturbance in usual sleep patterns
- Spends an increasing amount of time online or on their phone, checking in with someone you don't know
- Has suddenly changed their appearance or how they dress
- Has an unexplained increase in package deliveries, money, clothing or jewelry
- Has inconsistencies in his or her story

# IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO UNDERSTAND E-TECHNOLOGY

If you are the parent of a teen or tween, chances are that your child has a much more comfortable relationship with online technology than you do. That's normal, but to help protect them, it's essential to be aware of some important information.

## PRIVACY SETTINGS

Parents should understand how to adjust privacy settings. Default settings for many programs are "public," which means that any stranger can see what your child is posting. Settings should be restricted to known friends. At the end of this guide, we have placed some instructions for adjusting privacy settings for some popular sites amongst children and teens.

## LIMIT IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

In addition to explicit photos, check that your child is not posting sensitive information like cell phone number, address, email address, geolocation, or birth year on social media. For younger children who insist on posting photos, provide them other alternatives such as setting their profile picture to their favorite cartoon character or an avatar. Children as early as elementary school may also insist on taking videos alone or with a group of friends (using apps such as TikTok). Below we have already provided information on ways to monitor their usage.

## SET RULES ABOUT WHERE AND HOW YOUR CHILD USES SOCIAL MEDIA

Require that children use their phones or laptops in common areas of the house, such as the living room, especially at night. Ask them about who they chat with, along with names or phone numbers that you do not recognize. Some parents have required that their children add them as "friends" in their social media groups but be advised: kids have created accounts for their parents to view and a separate one for their peer group (these accounts are often called a "Finsta" - "fake Instagram"). [The New York Times](#) has posted more information about how to talk to your child about their usage for all age ranges.

## BEWARE OF NEW “FRIEND” REQUESTS

The internet has revolutionized the ability of our children to connect with their peers across the globe, an innovation that can be educational and deeply meaningful. At the same time, any time your child connects with a “new friend,” there is a real danger that a predator is entering their life and your home. Teach them that a friend is not someone they just met and that a “friend” online is not the same thing as a friendship developed over time and in person. Make sure that children are not sending friend requests to people they’ve never met.

## USE ONLINE SECURITY TOOLS TO TRACK ONLINE ACTIVITY

Footprints is an app that uses GPS real-time to track where your child is. Bark monitors text messages, emails, and 25 different social networks for potential safety concerns. It can alert you to issues like sexting, cyberbullying, online predators, and adult content with algorithms that analyze words and sites showing up on your child’s phone.

## BLOCK AND MONITOR CERTAIN SITES

If you feel that your child needs restraint beyond what you can accomplish through conversation or house rules, consider using programs to prevent him or her from visiting certain sites, especially those with sexually explicit content. You can put a filter on any devices your child uses through different programs and apps. To prevent accidental exposure, consider configuring your search engine for “safe search” or use [SafeKids.com](https://www.safekids.com) Child Safe Search page.





# SPEAK WITH YOUR KIDS

PACT has spent hundreds of hours in classrooms with students, and while we have been sharing information about healthy relationships, online safety and the dangers of sex trafficking, these students also have taught us a great deal. Here's what we have learned from them:

## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Candid conversations with our children about healthy and unhealthy sexual behavior are essential to protecting them. Some child trafficking victims reported being tricked by an exploiter because they never had discussed sex with their families. Additionally, traffickers target children who have suffered prior sexual abuse and who do not have a clear understanding of sexual boundaries.

## SEXTING IS FOREVER

Let your kids know that sexting is illegal and images can be difficult or impossible to remove once posted. Advise them to report online behavior that makes them uncomfortable just like they would offline. Lead with empathy without minimizing sexting. Find the balance of iterating the seriousness of this topic while also helping them understand that you are a safe adult to come to if they were ever in such a situation. Fear of getting in trouble can make an already scary situation worse. Talk through their experience or what they've heard about sexting and explain to them the dangerous consequences of their actions.

## TAKE AN INTEREST IN THEIR FRIENDS

Encourage friendships that have been long-lasting and beneficial for your child as they grow. At the same time, stay aware of new friendships. How does your child know this person, how is that information confirmed? Are they older or isolating your child from their normal friend group? Are they offering opportunities that seem unrealistic? Let them know that traffickers try to woo young people with promises of a better life, attention, and love. Traffickers are masterful at exploiting dreams, and now is a time many children are dreaming of something different.

## LOOK FOR CHANGES IN THEIR BEHAVIOR

Adolescence can be a hard time for young people, so some changes in a child's behavior will be natural. However, some children may adopt coping mechanisms that involve alcohol or drugs. Notice if your child has new clothing items, makeup products, cell phones and inquire about how they got them - are they getting packages and deliveries from new places but not having their own income to purchase these things? If you see signs that your child might be using drugs or alcohol, if your child seems depressed, or if you believe that someone is grooming your child to exploit them, get help.

## CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Fear of "getting in trouble" is a major factor in a child's decision to avoid seeking help. Catfishes, traffickers and other exploiters know this, and a child will often be subjected to prolonged sexual abuse rather than risk discovery by a parent. If your child has engaged in sending explicit posts, remain calm and supportive. Your child is likely a crime victim, and they need your support and protection, not criticism or punishment.

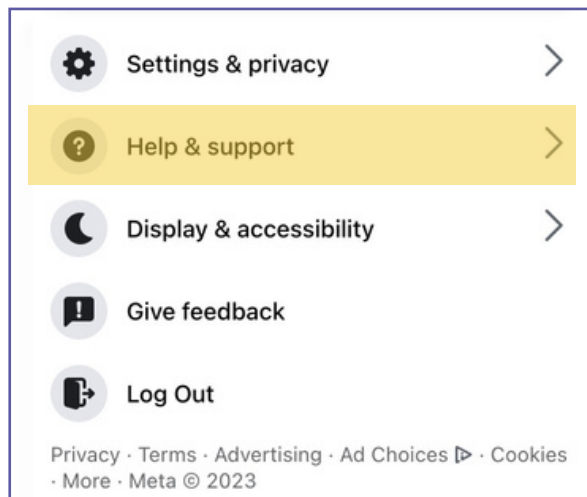
## SHARENTING

Sharenting is the use of social media to share news, images, etc of your children. Sharing content about your child can be a form of you sharing your love for your life with friends and family. It is important, however, to note that children cannot consent to their pictures being posted online. Remember that if you decide to share information of your child, not to post identifying information such as school location, community location, school bus routes/numbers.

There is also a new phenomenon of parents uploading videos of them scolding or punishing their children. Similar to anything else on the internet, those videos are hard to erase from the internet and can lead to further bullying from other children. Be the example. Provide a safe space for your children even when it is time to correct their behavior. Those kinds of videos can lead exploiters to using this information to become closer to the child.

# HOW TO ADJUST PRIVACY SETTINGS

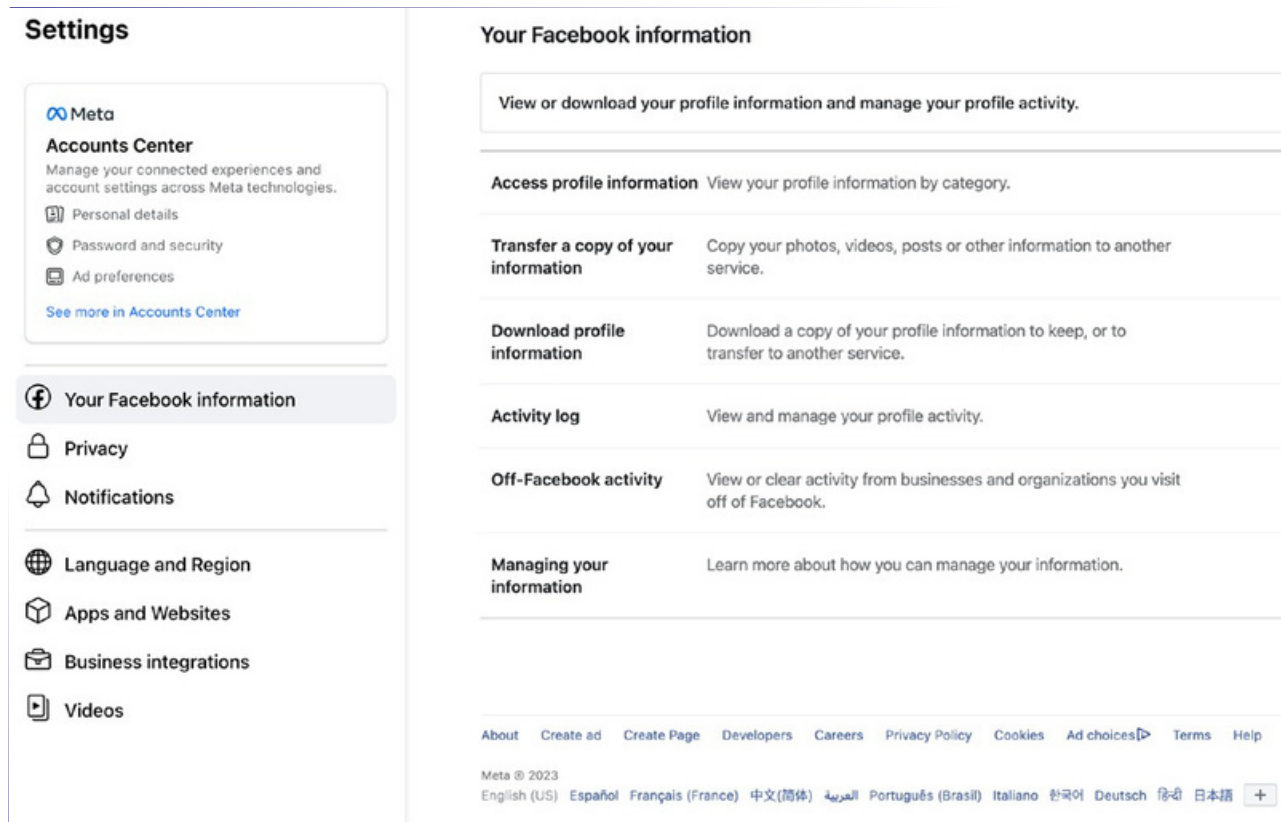
facebook



**Step 1:** Log in to the Facebook account with the phone number/email and password.

**Step 2:** Click on your profile picture in the top right corner. Select “Settings & Privacy”

**Step 3:** Select “Privacy Center” and you will be directed to the account privacy settings and can be adjusted as preferred.



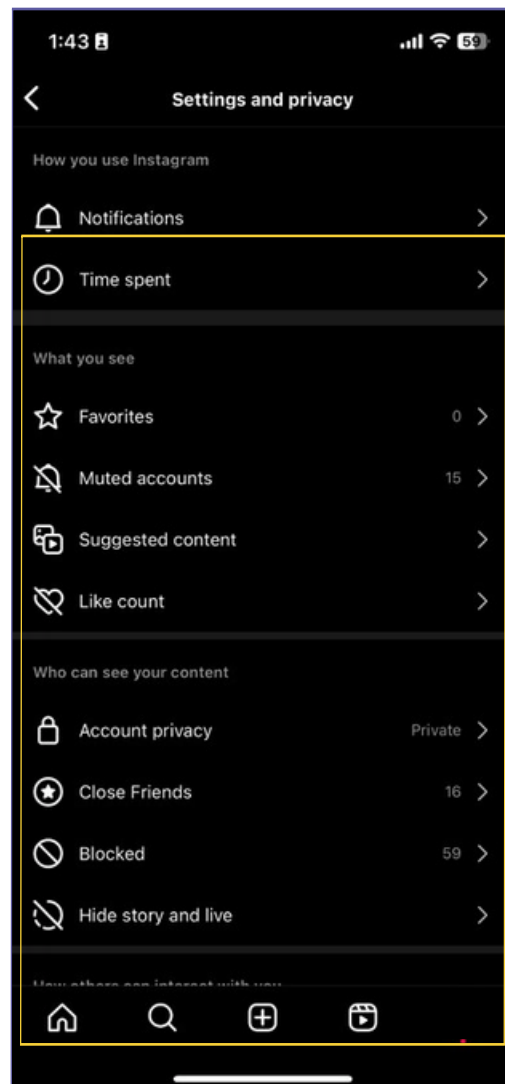
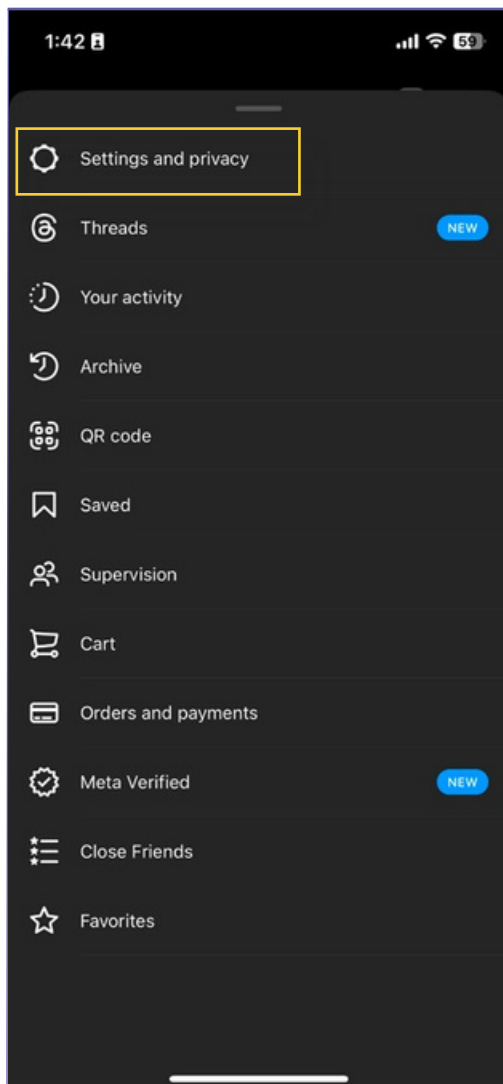
# HOW TO ADJUST PRIVACY SETTINGS



**Step 1:** Log in to the Instagram account with the username/email and password.

**Step 2:** Select Menu on the top right corner of the app and select "Settings" > "Privacy".

**Step 3:** You will be directed to the account privacy settings and can be adjusted as preferred.



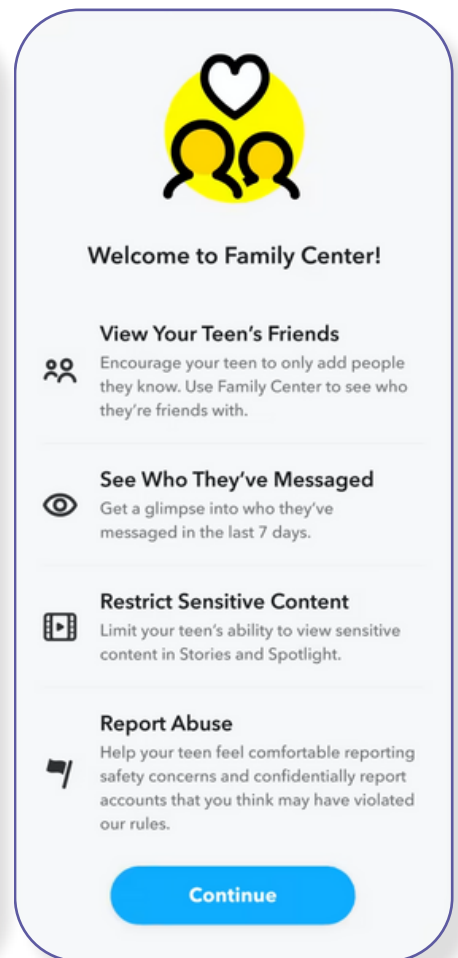
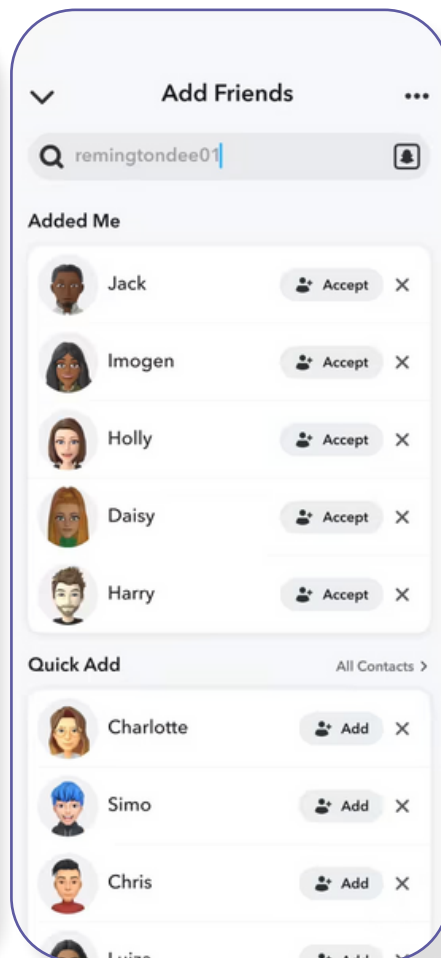
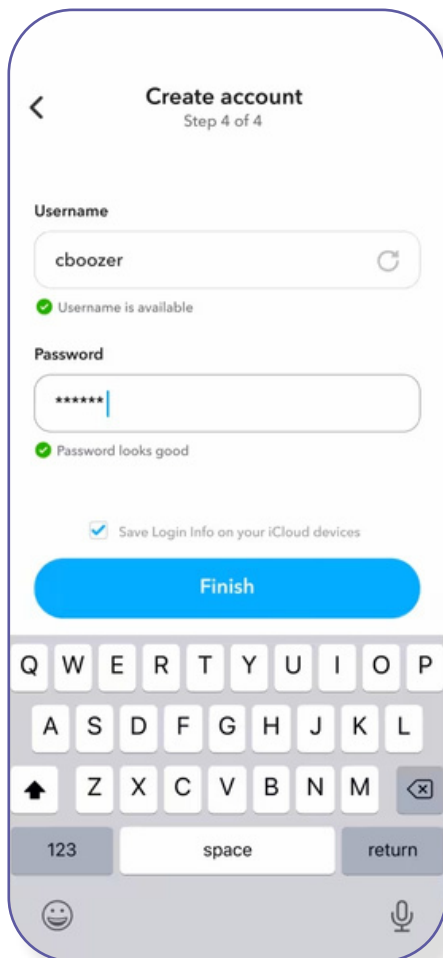
# HOW TO ADJUST PRIVACY SETTINGS



**Step 1:** Open the app and tap 'Sign Up' to create an account. Once you enter all the relevant information as prompted, you can create your Snapchat username.

**Step 2:** Ask your teen for their username so you can add them as a friend. Once you have their username, you can search for it using the search bar at the Camera screen's top-left corner.

**Step 3:** Once your teen has accepted your friend request, you'll be ready to get started with Family Center.



# HOW TO ADJUST PRIVACY SETTINGS

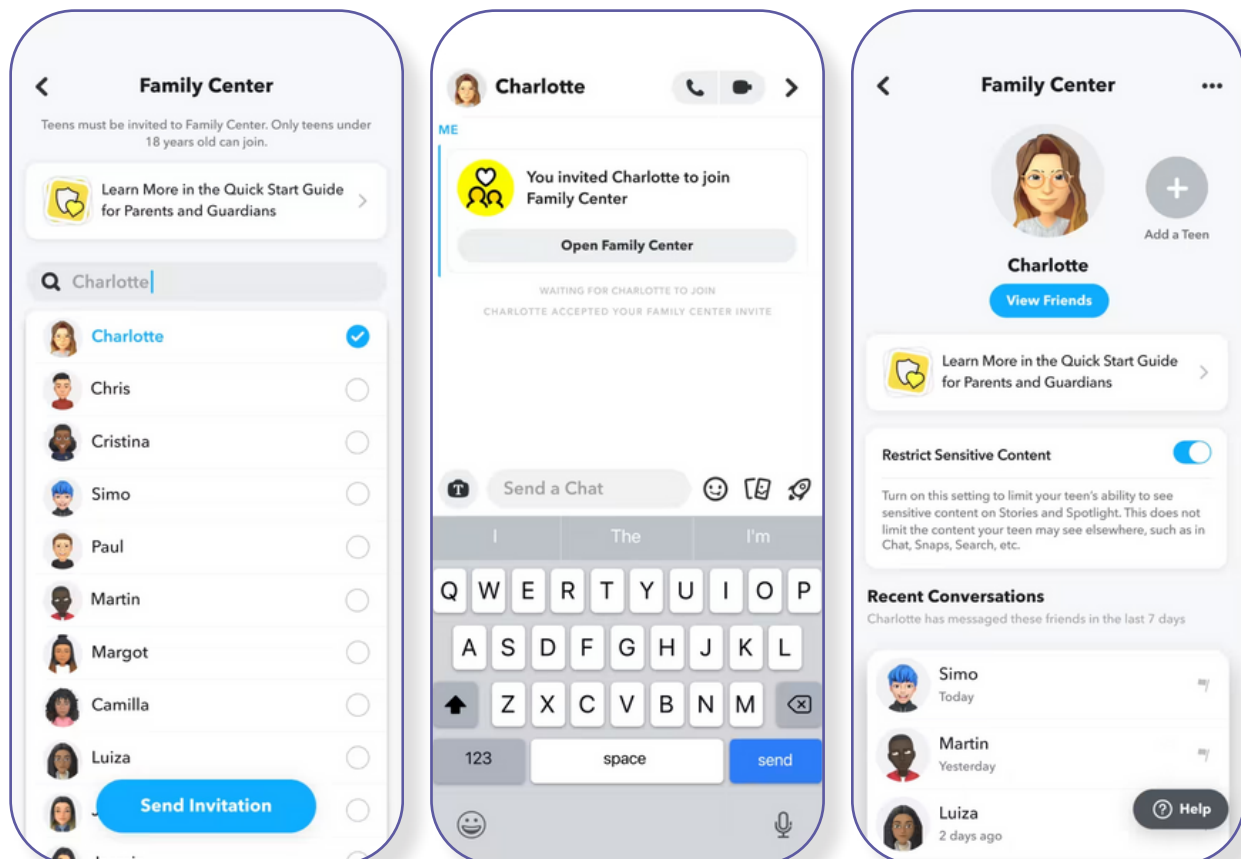


**Step 4:** There are two ways to access Family Center on Snapchat: You can use the search bar. Search relevant terms such as “safety,” “family,” or “parent,” and Family Center will appear. OR, head to Settings (gear icon), located in the top-right corner of your Profile Page (located at the top left corner across all tabs), where Family Center has a permanent home.

**Step 5:** Once you open Family Center, you’ll need to invite your teen to join. Your teen will receive an invitation card, and they must opt in to participate.

**Step 6:** Now, you can use Family Center to see who your teens are talking to and set Content Controls.

**Step 7:** Now, you can use Family Center to see who your teens are talking to and set Content Controls.



# HOW TO ADJUST PRIVACY SETTINGS



Step 1: Log in to the TikTok account with the username/email and password.

Step 2: Click on “Profile” on the bottom right corner.

Step 3: Select the Settings icon (three lines) on the top right corner.

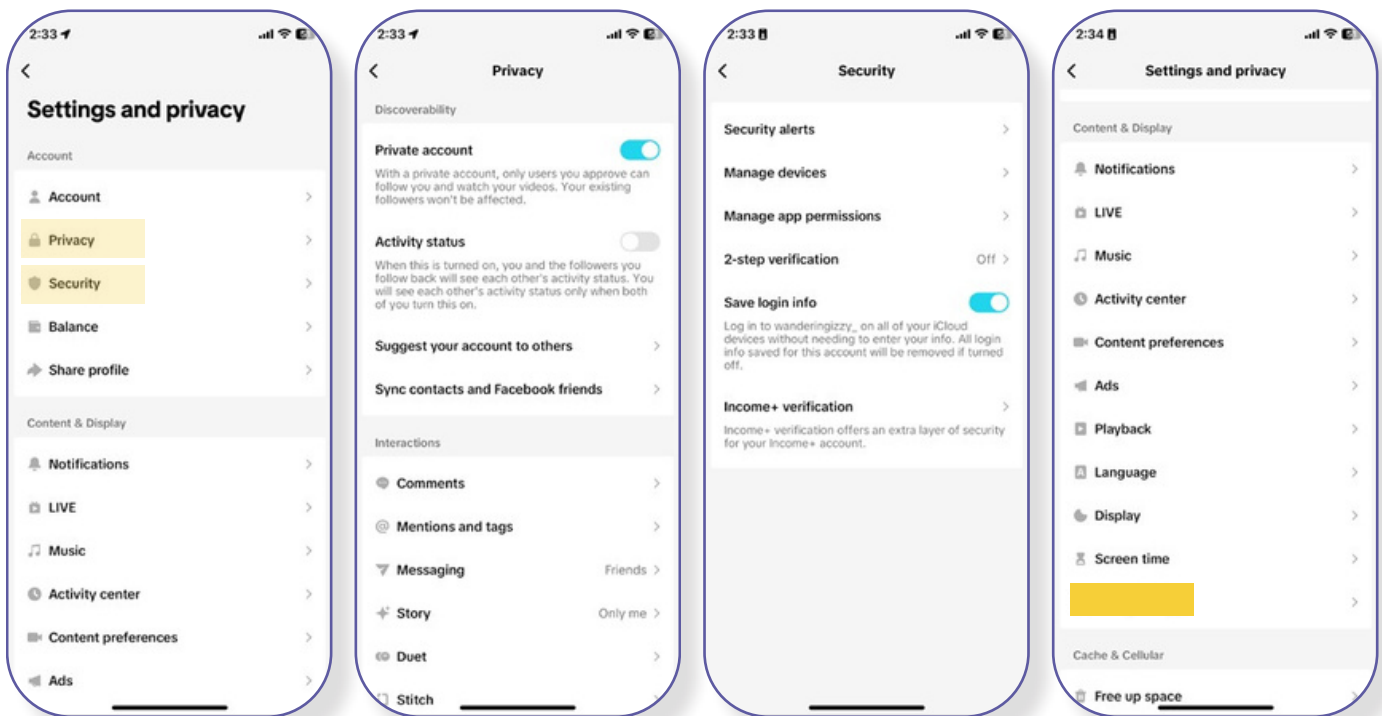
Step 4: Select “Settings and Privacy.”

Step 5: Select “Privacy” and set settings to your preference.

Step 6: Return to the original Settings and Privacy drop down menu.

Step 7: Click on “Security” and set settings to your preference.

Step 8: Return to the original Settings and Privacy drop down menu. Click on “Family Pairing” and set settings to your preference.



## HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

If you see warning signs and think a child may be a victim of human trafficking, call the **National Human Trafficking Hotline at 888-373-7888 or text 233733.**

Also offers an online chat. All are available 24/7 in English and Spanish, or in 200 additional languages through an on-call interpreter.

### **NCMEC (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children) - 1-800-THE-LOST**

NCMEC's CyberTipline is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children.

For more tools and information, check out the resources page on our site. To learn more about how to empower youth to become advocates against trafficking in their communities, visit PACT's Youth Against Child Trafficking (Y-ACT) program page on our site.

[WeArePACT.org](https://www.WeArePACT.org)

