

What is Kik? And is Kik okay for Kids?

By

[Jean](#)

– August 29, 2012 Posted in: [Internet Safety](#), [mobile devices/tablets](#)

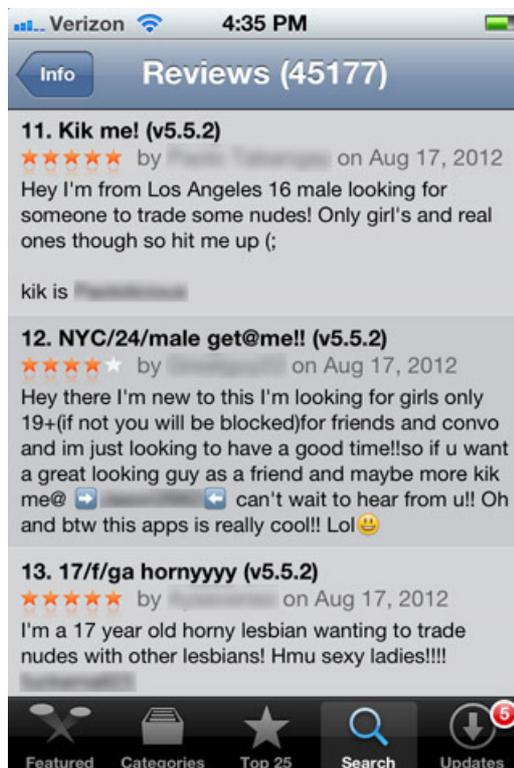
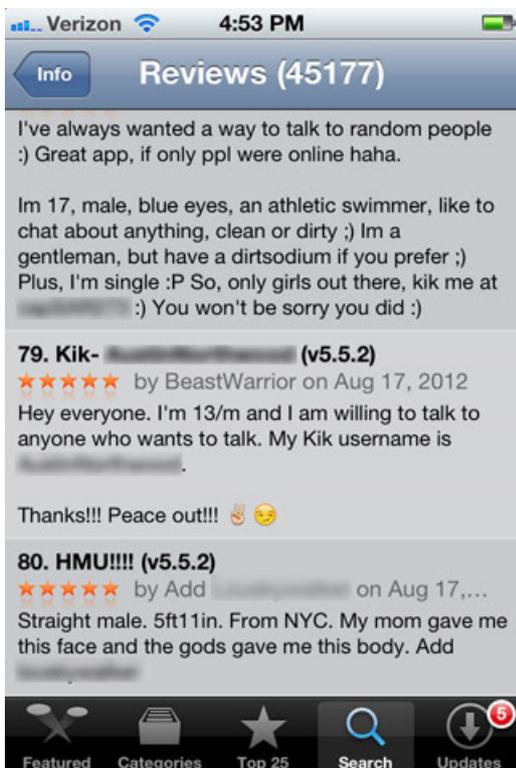


Sounds like a commercial for a sugary cereal – Kik for Kids! But are all the kids using Kik *really* kids?

I'd been hearing about Kik Messenger, a free texting app available for iPhones, Android, Windows, and Blackberry phones. Remember, you don't need a phone to use iPhone apps; if your child has an iPod touch or an iPad, they can install iPhone apps. Kik is just one of many free texting apps available in the App store.

I was curious about Kik so I went to the App store to download it. I read the description and noticed there were over 40,000 reviews for the app. That's a lot and I was curious to see what people had to say. It didn't take me long to see what the problem is with Kik.

Here are a few screenshots from the reviews page. I've removed and blurred the usernames.

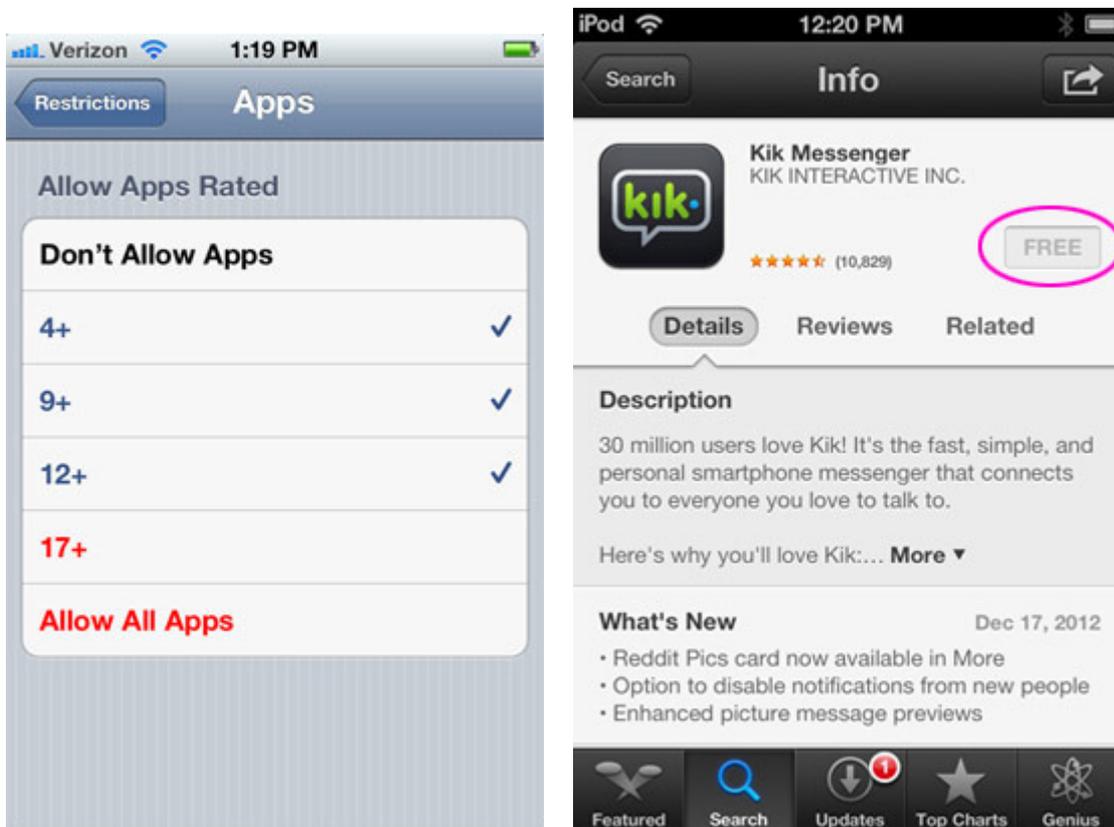


Take a look – these comments were all left on just one day and there are thousands more like them. It's clear that some people blatantly use Kik to send and receive nude pictures. Some call it sexting. Others call it child pornography. I call it creepy.

While I'm sure that many people use Kik to simply send messages to friends, the fact that it is very popular for sexting leads me to believe it is not a good choice for kids. Given that there are many other free texting apps available, including iMessage which is already included for iPod touch, I don't see a need for Kik on a child's mobile device.

Prevent your child from downloading Kik

Kik is rated 17+ in the app store. You can adjust App Rating restrictions (at least for iPod, iPad and iPhone users) to prevent the download of adult-oriented apps like Kik. [Learn how to restrict apps by rating](#). Once set up your child will not be able to download apps over the allowed app rating. In this example my daughter cannot download any app rated 17+. If she were to try to download Kik, the option would be greyed out.



Kik and Instagram

On Kik, you need to know someone's username to start an online chat. Some Kik users use Instagram to publicize their Kik username in their profiles or by tagging their photos. You'll see some users with "Kik me" and then their Kik username in their profile. If your child or teen's Instagram profile is public, and they use it to publicize their Kik username, then anyone who sees that on Instagram might "hit them up" on Kik. So keep this in mind if you allow your child or teen to use Instagram.

Here's another account from a concerned parent: <http://www.hightechdad.com/2012/07/02/parents-beware-instagram-kik-messenger-are-a-dangerous-combination-what-social-dangers-to-check-for/>

So parents, check your child's phone or iPod touch. If you see the Kik messenger icon, open the app and take a look at the messages. If you don't like what you see, discuss with your child. Maybe he or she isn't really aware of the potential dangers and consequences.

A recent review on the iTunes page sums it up: "This app is quick easy and fun, but too many pedophiles asking me for nude pictures which almost forced me to delete this app. But it is safe as long as you don't talk to strangers."

5-20-2013: I've had to close comments on this article. Unfortunately some of the comments I'm receiving lately – which have NOT been approved and published – contain insults and profanity, or people sharing their Kik usernames. I don't have time to police all that! I think the comments to date provide a fair assessment and plenty of opinions on either side of the "Is Kik okay for kids" question. I appreciate all who have taken the time to share their thoughts on the subject, especially teens who have done so in a respectful manner.

[What is Vine? Is Vine okay for Kids?](#)

By

[Jean](#)

– June 11, 2013 Posted in: [App Review](#)



I know it's time to review an app when my daughter asks for it or several parents ask me about it. So looks like that time has come for Vine. Vine is a video creation app where all the videos are 6 seconds or less. The videos or "vines" as they are called play in an endless loop. The videos are shared with other Vine users who you follow and can be shared on Facebook or Twitter.

Think Instagram, but with short videos rather than photos.

Twitter launched the Vine service earlier this year for Apple devices. It was recently made available on Android devices as well. From what I've seen, most of the "vines" being created are **silly, stupid, inane, or insane**. Every now and then you'll find a video that is artistic and creative, making the most of the "stop-motion" like effect that the video recording and looping helps create.

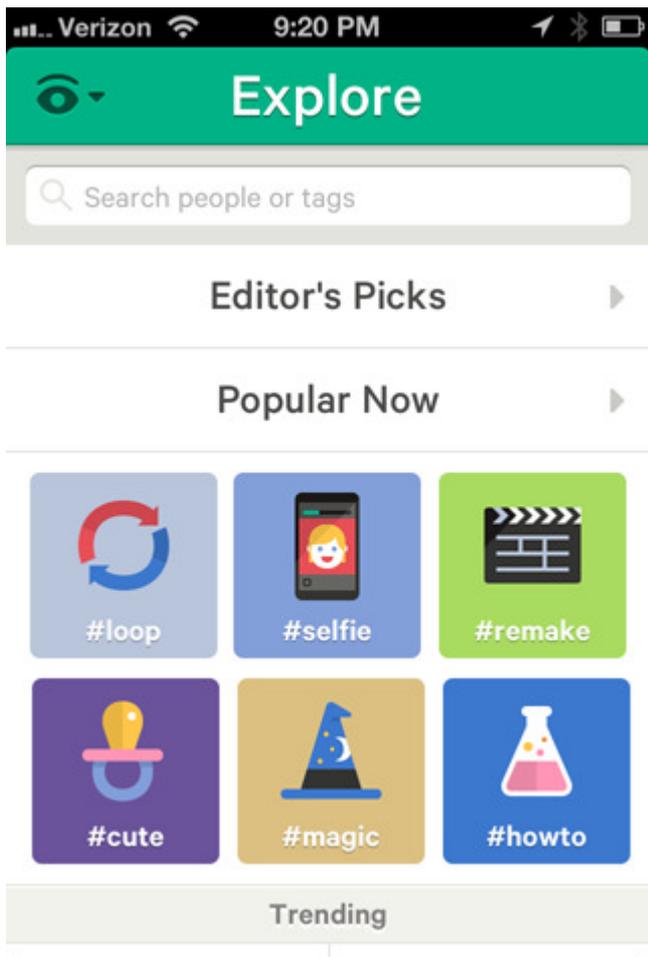
Is Vine okay for Kids?

As with most social networks, Vine's terms of service specify that the service is **not intended for those under 13** and parents can ask to have a child's account removed. However there is no age verification when creating an account.

Vine has a **17+ rating** in the Apple app store. If you've [set a child's iPod/iPad/iPhone to restrict apps by rating](#), they will not be able to download Vine.

All profiles are public. There are no options for setting your Vine account to a private setting like you can on Instagram. That means that any "vine" you create and share could potentially be seen by anyone else using Vine.

There is an Explore feature where you can randomly peruse user's videos. And like Twitter, Instagram and other social networks, Vine users tag their videos with **hashtags** as a way to describe them. A hashtag is a word preceded by a pound sign such as #food. Click the hashtag to discover other videos that use the same hashtag. While the #food hashtag will lead you to short video demos on, say, how to make a smoothie, some hashtags are clearly not intended for the 13 and under crowd. (Ever heard of #nsfw? That means **not safe for work**, meaning that the user is being warned that that the content may be inappropriate in a work setting.)



As I poked around it didn't take me long to discover **plenty of content inappropriate for children**. One video showed someone lighting a pipe...and no I don't think it was filled with tobacco! Another video showed nudity and rude gestures.

A few of the videos I watched looked like they were recorded in a school setting. Clearly there are teens using the service along with young adults. Similar to Instagram, you'll see comments such as "follow me and I'll follow you back".

There is really no such thing as Private

If you think that only those with the Vine app on their phones can see these videos, think again. Web sites have popped up (not associated with Vine or Twitter) that display all the recent "vines" created in the app – right on the web for anyone to see. If your teen is pleading with you not to take Vine away, have 'em take a look [here](#). Do they want their video popping up on the web for all – college recruiters, grandma, YOU – to see?

So should I let my kid have a Vine account?

The only benefit I can see is for older teens who are interested in the art of video, animation, and film. Vine would be an attractive option but there are other more educational video-editing apps and sites. Take a look at the [Digital Fun for Creative Kids](#) list from Common Sense Media for some suggestions.

And while you're on the Common the Common Sense site, check out their [Vine review](#), with the summary "It might be the new thriving social media darling, but for now at least, keep young children and teens away."

Instagram has added video, just a few short weeks after I wrote about the video sharing app [Vine](#). Guess the folks at Instagram saw some of their app market share shrinking and needed to jump on the video bandwagon. Or maybe this had been their plan all along. Either way, what does this mean for parents of Instagrammers?

What should parents know about video on Instagram?

The [basics of Instagram](#) are still the same. You take a picture or upload a picture, add a filter (or not), then share with your Instagram followers. If the Instagram account is connected to social media sites, the photo can be shared on Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr.

These basics now apply to video. You take a video from within the app, add a filter (or not) and then share. As with photos, videos can be [geotagged with a location](#), and can be viewed on an [Instagram web profile](#).

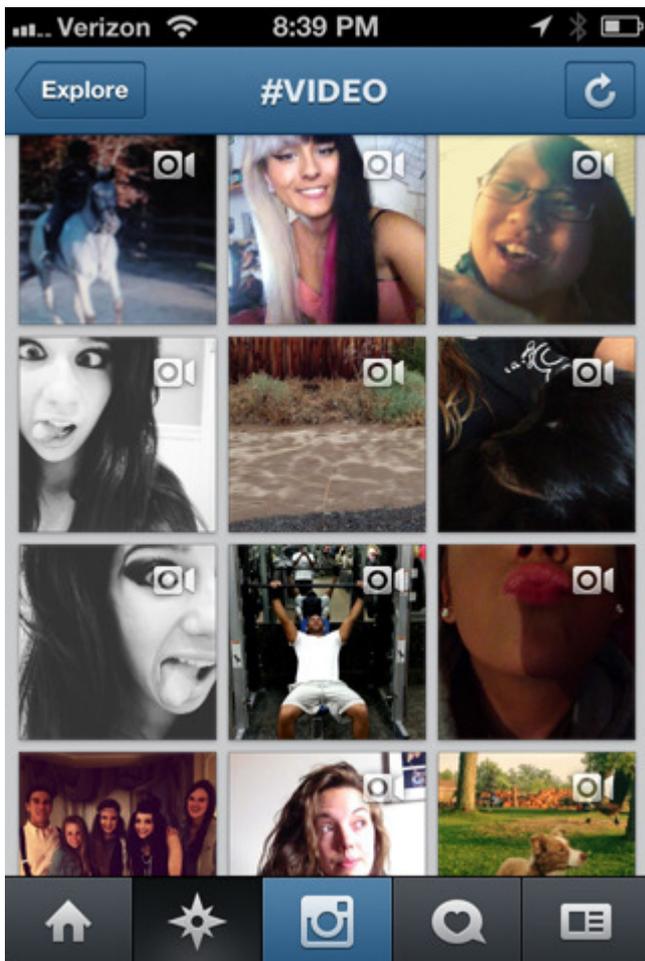
Here are a few more key points:

If your child's photos are private, their videos are private too

The privacy settings for an account apply to all content – photos and videos. [[Learn how to make Instagram account private](#)]. Keep in mind however that a user's PROFILE is always public, so screen your child's profile to make sure it does not include any personal information. For example you might have them remove their last name, or school if listed.

Your child can view videos that have been shared publicly

All Instagram users can access the “Explore” tab in their Instagram app. Here, your child could stumble upon any publicly shared photo or video. They can search videos or photos by “hashtag” like #sunsets for pretty pictures of sunsets, or #video to find videos.



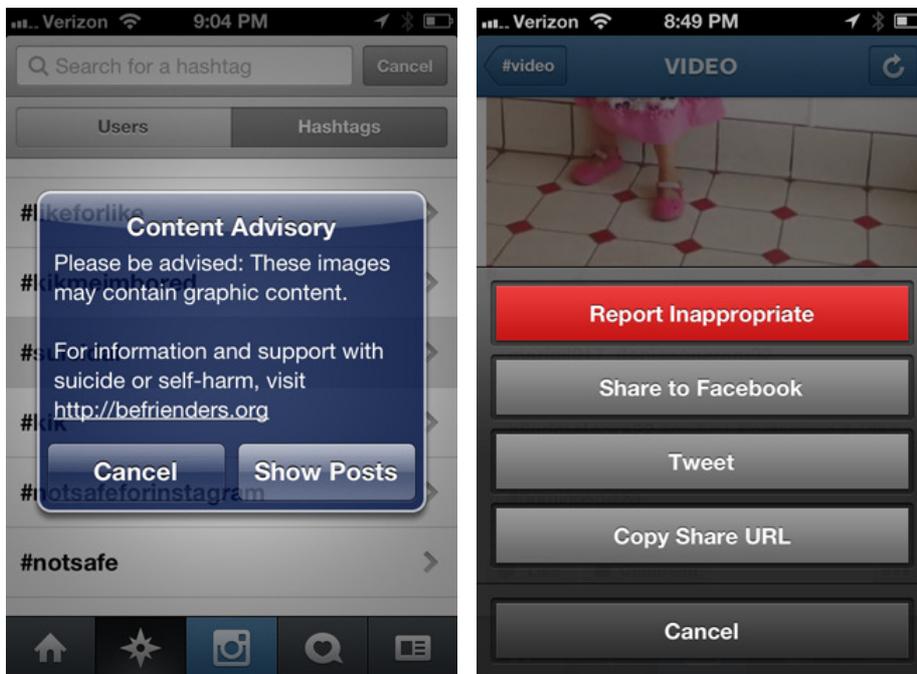
Instagram is not designed for the 13 and under crowd

Instagram is rated 12+ in the app store (and Vine is rated 17+). Instagram seems less tolerant of inappropriate content as mentioned in their terms:

“While we respect the artistic integrity of photos and videos, we have to keep our product and the content within it in line with our App Store’s rating for nudity and mature content. In other words, please do not post nudity or mature content of any kind.”

Your child could come across content you deem inappropriate

By clicking on friend's profiles or perusing the "Explore" tab, your child could encounter nudity or other mature content despite the app's terms. This could be shocking or downright scary, depending on the age of your child and the photo or video in question. Here is a warning I saw when clicking the hashtagged word "suicidal" that sadly seems to be a frequent hashtag. Even with the warning, if you click "Show Posts" you will see some disturbing imagery.



Mature content can be reported. Click on three little dots below a photo or video and then choose "Report Inappropriate".

Is your child using Instagram? Have they upgraded the app to the new version with video? If so keep these points in mind during your next internet safety discussion (you're having them, right!?) Instagram can be a fun way to explore photography and video, for the right age group, with the right supervision and expectations. Let's see those #sunsets!

What is Omegle? Is Omegle okay for kids?

By

[Jean](#)

– February 20, 2013 Posted in: [Internet Safety](#)



Have you heard of the website Omegle? I hadn't until a teenager mentioned it in a [comment on another article](#). I've also had several requests from concerned parents asking for a review. Omegle is a website that allows you to chat with a random stranger. So right away we have probably answered the question in the title of this post! Omegle is not okay for kids – unless you are okay with your kids chatting with complete strangers. I'm guessing that you're not.

Omegle has been around since 2008, with video chat added in 2009. When you use Omegle you do not identify yourself through the service – chat participants are only identified as “You” and “Stranger”. From there however, anything goes – certainly a chat participant may decide to give their name, location, age and other personal information.

I tried it a few times by clicking on the link to start chatting with a stranger. The first thing I was asked was “asl” – meaning what is my age, sex and location. I disconnected immediately from that chat! On the second test, I ended up in a brief chat with a young man, a software developer from India. Well, that is what he said but that's the thing – who really knows?

Another Be Web Smart reader did a test and shared the conversation with me:

Q: is this site safe for preteens?

Stranger 1: hahahahahahaha

Stranger 2: Wow

Stranger 1: send them to me pls

Are teens using Omegle?

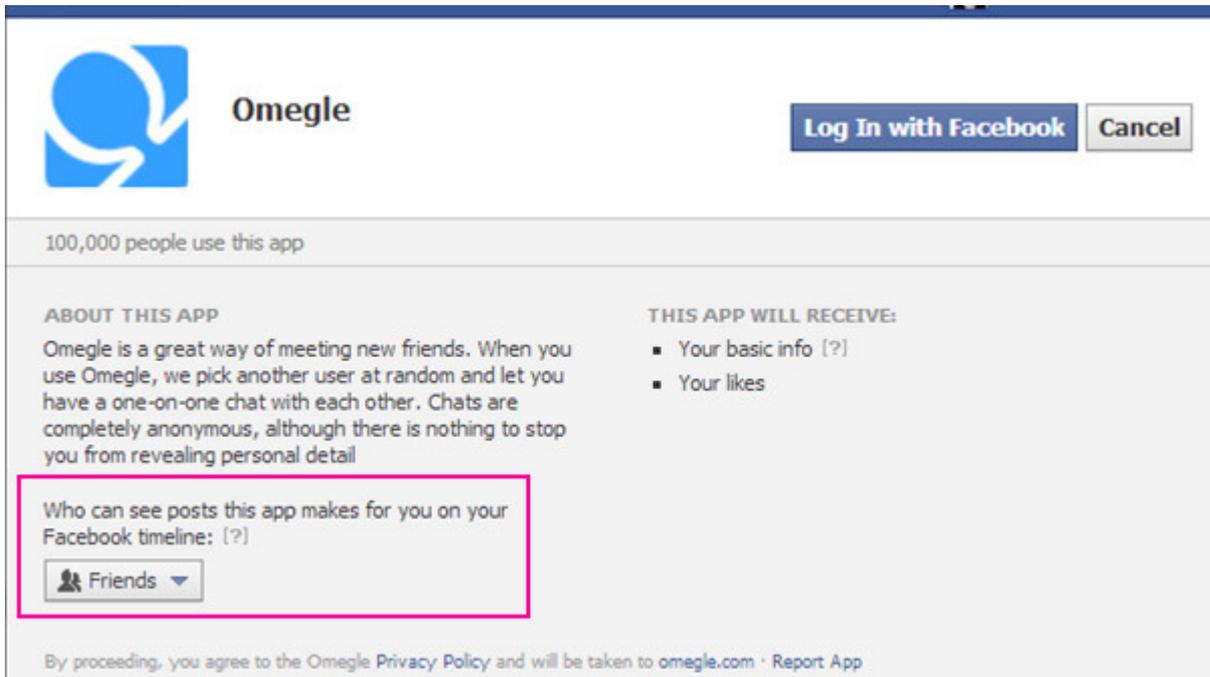
A quick Google search helped me to answer this question. A few clicks and I found text excerpts and videos on YouTube of teens sharing their stories of Omegle encounters. One video was a teen girl's story of how she met up with an Omegle chat buddy in person without her parents' knowledge. Another particularly sicko video showed how someone scared teens on an Omegle video chat with his face made up similar to the Joker from the Batman movie (R.I.P. Heath Ledger).

Five reasons not to use Omegle

In case you've read this far and are still not quite convinced that Omegle is a bad idea, here are a few facts about privacy and how the Omegle service works:

1. The Omegle homepage clearly states that the service is not for those under 13: “Do not use Omegle if you are under 13. If you are under 18, use it only with a parent/guardian's permission.” I'm guessing that not too many 16 year olds are asking mom or dad for the okay.
2. You can connect Omegle to your Facebook account to find chat partners with similar interests. When choosing this feature, an Omegle Facebook app will receive your Facebook “likes” and try to match you with a stranger with similar likes. This action connects your Omegle use to Facebook, and Facebook friends could potentially see Omegle activity on your profile. (Although

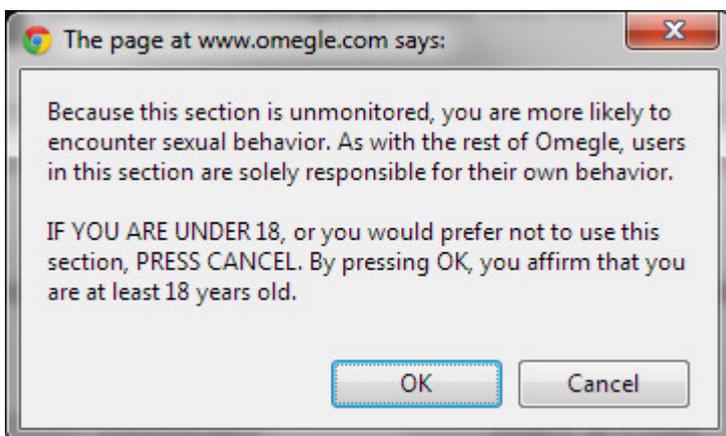
you can change that setting – highlighted below – to “Me Only” so that your Omegle activity is not shared).



3. The Omegle privacy policy clearly states that the following information is saved on their servers for 120 days: “the time your chat began, your IP address, a randomly-generated ID tag assigned to your computer, your chat partner’s IP address, and your chat partner’s randomly-generated ID tag.” While this data is used for law enforcement and to try to track and prevent spammers, note that you are willingly providing this information when using Omegle.

4. There are two video chat modes, monitored and unmonitored. Using video chat requires that your computer’s IP address is made available to the stranger’s computer: “Omegle video chat requires a direct connection to be made between your computer and the other user’s computer...”

This is the warning received when initiating an unmonitored video chat:



5. At the end of an Omegle chat, users have the option to save the chat’s log and share the link. Therefore your conversation is not really private, and the contents of the chat including any personal information you might share can be sent to anyone without your knowledge.

You have disconnected.

[New chat](#) or [switch to video](#)

Find strangers with common interests ([Settings](#))

[Was this chat great?](#) Save the log: [Get a link](#) • [Select all](#) • Or post log to: [Facebook](#) • [Tumblr](#) • [Twitter](#) • [reddit](#)

Omegle sharing options

How do I know if my teen is using Omegle?

You can take a look at the history in their web browser. The shortcut Ctrl-H will open the browser history in Firefox, Google Chrome, Internet Explorer and Safari. Then you can see what sites have been visited. Keep in mind that savvy kids may know how to delete their browsing history.

You can also ask them.

How to Block Omegle and similar websites

I was curious to know if the parental control software I use on our family laptop would allow my daughter to visit the Omegle site. We use Microsoft Live Family Safety and her account is filtered to only allow “General internet” websites, and no social media. I logged in to her account (I have the password, of course) and WAS able to get to the Omegle website. Not good! However, Live Family Safety gives me the ability to add any website to a block list. I can log into my admin account and specify any websites that should not be allowed. I did this right away to prevent Omegle from being available to my daughter.

Other services you can try for blocking specific websites include parental control filtering such as <http://www.keepmyfamilysecure.com/> and <http://www1.k9webprotection.com/>, or browser add-ons such as BlockSite for Firefox and Chrome.

To sum it up, I generally think it’s a good idea to avoid websites that include a disclaimer like this one from Omegle’s home page:

“Use Omegle at your own peril.”