

# What teens wish their parents knew about social media

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When teens were asked, recently, if they believe their parents know “a little” or “nothing” about what they do or say online, or even what social-media apps and sites they use, more than a quarter of them agreed.

After visiting schools around the country, it seems to me they’re likely giving their parents a bit too much credit. When I ask audiences at parent education nights how many have ever used Snapchat, Musical.ly or Tbh, few if any hands go up.

I’ve interviewed middle school and high school students about secrets they wish parents knew about their online use, but don’t necessarily want to tell them. These are three of the secrets students shared:

1. **“When you take away one device at night, you might not realize how many devices we still have with us.”** Access to smartphones has shifted communication for teens, and self-regulation can be difficult. The fear of missing out (FOMO) can create an overwhelming desire to be connected — in fact, according to 2015 Pew Research, 94 percent of teens go online daily, which isn’t surprising, and 24 percent of teens feel as though they are online constantly. Encouraging kids to find effective ways to self-regulate is sometimes about getting their buy-in — that is, encouraging them to reflect on the impact their daily online habits are having on their personal, academic and extracurricular goals.
2. **“Many of us have a fake Instagram account.”** A parent recently told me she had full control over her ninth-grade son’s online interactions. She explained that he didn’t even know the password for his Instagram account, and that if he wanted to post something, he had to go through her. I quietly surmised that her son might be hiding some of his online activities from her. If kids are online, parents are usually more effective acting as mentors than as micromanagers. Having open-ended conversations rather than wielding authoritative control enables kids to build the critical thinking skills needed to make smarter decisions online and in-real-life. For some kids, a finsta (“fake” Instagram) or a rinsta (“real” Instagram) might be where they feel they can share their raw, authentic feelings, even though they don’t always realize that anything shared online has the potential for a greater audience, amplified consequences or longer shelf-life. It’s up to parents to find a way in, not through coercion, but through conversation.
3. **“If we are passionate or angry about something, we take it to social media.”** Young people want their opinions to be heard. Many tweens and teens find their online communities are engaging, interactive and responsive. A message or Snapchat sent to a friend can result in an instant reply, and something posted to a group chat or online profile can create the opportunity for community-level conversation and engagement. Responses from friends and followers make kids feel heard and listened to, which is often critically important for those who simply want acknowledgment and validation (this isn’t, of course, much different for adults). At the same time, we know that teens’ and tweens’ brains are still developing and that kids often lack impulse control and the ability to understand the long-term consequences of decisions made in moments of anger and frustration. Parents who empathize with the challenges their children face can help them devise smarter, healthier ways to self-filter before posting.

And here are several things they’d like their parents to do:

1. **“Talk with us about the apps we like to use and why. Most of you have no idea about our world.”** One of my students recently told me how a group of nine of her friends from school were using family tracking apps to monitor one another. When she and a few of her friends wanted to hang out or were all in the same place, there would be a continual stream of