

## Trend Alert: 6 Messaging Apps That Let Teens Share (Iffy) Secrets

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You probably never thought you'd see the day when Facebook wasn't the center of teens' universe. But keeping up with Facebook friends through ad-filled newsfeeds and lengthy profiles, especially given the fact that everyone knows your name, is starting to feel tiresome to many teens.

Facebook is still a go-to place for many things, such as wishing someone a happy birthday or stalking a crush. However, newer social apps make it easier, faster, and more fun to capture and share fleeting moments -- sometimes anonymously. These temporary and anonymous-messaging apps provide an environment that feels more appropriate to the random, silly, saucy, and experimental sides of the average teenager.

Perhaps most importantly to teens, these apps can feel consequence-free. But of course they're not. Data never really disappears, and anonymity carries big risks. If you don't recognize the apps your kid is currently obsessing over, here's what you need to know:

**Temporary Apps** Temporary apps allow people to send messages and images that self-destruct after a set window of time. Teens can use these apps to more carefully manage their digital trails -- so long as they don't share things they wouldn't normally send otherwise.

**Snapchat:** A messaging app that lets users put a time limit on the pictures and videos they send before they disappear.

Why it's popular: Snapchat's creators intended the app's fleeting images to be a way for teens to share fun, light moments without the risk of having them go public. And that's what most teens use it for: sending goofy or embarrassing photos to one another. Teens may pay more attention to Snapchats, knowing they'll disappear in a matter of seconds.

### What parents need to know:

Many schools have yet to block it, which is one reason why teens like it so much.

It's a myth that Snapchats go away forever. Data is data: Whenever anything is sent online, it never truly goes away. (For example, the person on the receiving end can take a screenshot of the image before it disappears.) Snapchats can even be recovered.

It can make sexting seem OK. The seemingly risk-free messaging might encourage users to share pictures containing inappropriate content.

**Burn Note:** A texting-only app that erases messages after a set period of time. Messages are stored until first view and then deleted.

Why it's popular: Unlike other temporary apps, Burn Note's unique display system makes it more difficult (but not impossible) to copy or take a screenshot of sent messages. Though sending sensitive information via SMS (such as a PIN) isn't the smartest idea, Burn Note makes it safer:

**What parents need to know:**

Deleted texts cannot be recovered. Burn Note claims to completely expunge deleted messages from its server. Unread messages self-destruct after 30 days.

Burn Note doesn't share personal information with third parties for analytics or advertising purposes.

Recipients don't need to have Burn Note. You can send a message to an email address or a phone contact. The note will show up as a link.

**Anonymous Apps**

On the positive side, going incognito online helps us express ourselves in ways we might not be able to in the real world. On the negative side, anonymous apps are often riddled with inappropriate content. They also can encourage bullying behavior.

**Whisper:** A social "confessional" app that allows users to post whatever's on their mind. Users type a confession, add a background image, and share it with the Whisper community. It's intended for users age 17 and older.

Why it's popular: There's something to be said about sharing one's innermost thoughts without any repercussions, especially if they're not socially acceptable. It's cathartic. For those who simply choose to browse, Whisper can be amusing, heartbreaking, troubling, and comforting all at once.

**What parents need to know:**

The scenarios can be hard to stomach. Reading that a teacher has fantasies about his or her students or that someone's father is going to be released from jail and start a custody battle can weigh heavily on teens. Some confessions, however, are totally benign (and funny!).

There is plenty of inappropriate content. All too often, whispers are sexual. Some use Whisper to solicit others for sex (using the app's geo-location "nearby" feature). Strong language and drug and alcohol references also are prevalent (for example, "My wife and I were both high on our wedding day" and "I dropped acid with my mom once").

Whispers can go public. Entertainment news sites, such as BuzzFeed, are beginning to feature Whispers. The problem? When secrets -- including the embellished or fake ones -- become news, we may begin to find ourselves in tabloid territory.

**Secret - Speak Freely:** A social-media app that's designed to let people voice whatever's on their minds anonymously.

Why it's popular: Similar to Whisper, Secret lets people vent, confess, and share freely -- without anyone knowing who said what.

**What parents need to know:**

It tries to prevent users from defaming others. When Secret first launched in Silicon Valley, its adult users started using it to smack-talk their coworkers and bosses. Secret now detects when you mention someone by name (most of the time) and sends you a warning about it.

It requires some private information. Despite the fact that it promises user anonymity, it requires your email address and phone number.

Kids may encounter strong language. We came across "hell" and "f--k" almost immediately.

**Ask.fm:** A social site that lets kids ask questions and answer those posted by other users -- sometimes anonymously.

Why it's popular: Although there are some friendly interactions on Ask.fm -- Q&As about favorite foods or crushes, for example -- there are lots of mean comments and some creepy sexual posts. This iffy content is part of the site's appeal for teens.

**What parents need to know:**

Bullying is a major concern. The British news website MailOnline reported that the site has been linked to the suicides of several teens. Talk to your teens about cyberbullying and how anonymity can encourage mean behavior.

Anonymous answers are optional. Users can decide whether to allow anonymous posts and can remove their answers from streaming to decrease their profile's visibility. If teens do use the site, they'd be best turning off anonymous answers and keeping themselves out of the live stream.

Q&As can appear on Facebook. Syncing with Facebook means that a much wider audience can see those Q&As' behavior.

**Omegle:** An anonymous chat client through which users discuss anything they'd like. Its conversations are filled with lewd language and references to sexual content, drugs and alcohol, and violence.

Why it's popular: Online chat rooms have been around for ages, as have the iffy and inappropriate conversations that happen in them. Though there are many misconceptions about "online predators," it's true that risky online relationships -- though rare -- more frequently evolve in chat rooms when teens willingly seek out or engage in sexual conversation.

**What parents need to know:**

Users get paired up with strangers. That's the whole premise of the app. And there's no registration required.

This is NOT an app for kids and teens. Omegle is filled with people searching for sexual chat. Some prefer to do so live. Others offer links to porn Websites.

Language is a big issue. And since the chats are anonymous, they're often much more explicit than with someone who can be identified.

**The best way to approach these apps with your kids?** Talk to them about their online reputations -- not in terms of "getting caught" by teachers, college-admissions officers, or future employers, but as a matter of being the best person they can possibly be. Acknowledge that, chances are, they'll come across extreme, inappropriate, or hurtful content online...and that it's OK for them to ask you about it, especially if it upsets them. These kinds of conversations will be far from fleeting -- the benefits will last a lifetime.