

Feedback for Instagram Parental Guidelines: March 2020

Led by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation in collaboration with digital child safety organizations Protect Young Eyes, Reach10, and Protect Young Minds.

General suggestion on the theme: it is important for Instagram to be transparent with parents about the threats inherent to any social media account, and an Instagram account in particular. The current content doesn't really address any of the real threats adolescents and teens face and leave parents thinking that the only real problem might be bullying. Instagram has a responsibility to be more helpful to parents.

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Consider adding the below sentence in red. Please also consider creating a graphic out of the red sentence and making it its own page so parents fully recognize the inherent threats.

“While it might seem like posting photos and videos is second nature for teens, many of them actually put a lot of thought into what they share online. Further, as with any social media platform, there are threats of cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, grooming for sexual abuse or sex trafficking, gang recruitment, stalking, exposure to graphic sexual or violent images, mental health struggles such as anxiety or body image problems, and more. It's hard to know how to have an open conversation with our teens and keep them safe while we're learning to navigate the landscape ourselves.”

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In the "What is Instagram" section, this point should be stronger: "The minimum age to have an Instagram account is 13." Add something like "Kids younger than 13 may not have the maturity or judgment to use social media wisely."

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The “Manage Privacy” section should be renamed to “Manage Privacy for Safety.” For youth, privacy settings are essentially safety settings in most cases, and it's important for parents to recognize that lens in order to motivate them to read the document.

Similarly, “Manage Interactions” could be renamed “Manage Interactions for Safety”

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In the “Manage Privacy” section, it is important for Instagram to highlight the ability to toggle off Direct Messages from strangers. The language should acknowledge: “Parents should recognize that these safety and privacy settings are important because both Comments and Direct Messages from strangers can sometimes lead to cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, grooming for sexual abuse or sex trafficking, gang recruitment, and more.”

This section should acknowledge that: “If a user account is private, note that its comments are still publicly visible if the user posts a comment on post by a public account, and this leaves the user vulnerable to threats of cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, and more.”

This section should acknowledge that: “If a user account is private, it can still receive Direct Messages from strangers. These messages go to a secondary inbox, and can be ignored or blocked one-by-one, but know that direct messages from strangers can lead to cyber-bullying, gang recruitment, sex trafficking grooming, and more. We recommend discussing direct messages with your child.”

It should also highlight any progress that will be public by that time towards age-based safety settings so parents know which safety settings are automatically on for their child, or which ones need to be turned on.

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Under "Manage Interactions" and in the Glossary under "Report," Instagram should add some language about how responsive they are to users reporting cases of bullying, sexual harassment, nudity, graphic violent images, or other offensive material. Yes, people can report but often they feel like it won't do anything, so Instagram should be transparent about what steps they will take to remove or investigate reported content.

Further, “Manage Interactions” should include a page about how to report a comment or an account, and it should include a sentence like: “Blocking and reporting users or comments may be necessary in circumstances where a user is bullying, posting nudity, making lewd or suggestive comments under the photo of a minor, encouraging violence, drug, or gang activity, requests nude images of a minor, etc.”

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Multiple digital child safety organizations commented that the following statement, under “Manage Time” should be removed: "When it comes to spending time on Instagram, there's no right or wrong answer when it comes to how much is too much or just right."

These organizations noted that this is not an evidence-based statement, as there is ample research about long period of screen time outside of school being correlated with problems in brain development, worse memory, worse language skills, and shorter attention levels.

Instead, Instagram should include a sentence that acknowledges potential harms of prolonged screen time, particularly among adolescents, and should then pivot to explain the tools Instagram provides without any justification or minimization of those concerns or that body of research.

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In the “Ten Questions,” there should be a more specified question focused on sexualized content and harassment, similar to Question 10, which is currently “What would you do if you saw someone being bullied on Instagram? (Do you know about the reporting tools and the offensive comment filter on Instagram?)”

Suggested question: “Have you ever seen nudity or sexual content on Instagram? Have you or any of your friends ever been asked for nude images on Instagram, or been contacted by a

stranger who turns the conversation sexual? (Do you know about the reporting tools and the offensive comment filter on Instagram?)”

*Design Note: Some individuals who reviewed this document, who are the age of most parents with adolescents using Instagram, commented that the white text on bright pages was difficult for them to read.