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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

YOUTUBE

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*YouTube is the
new TV.*

—John Lynch, [*Business Insider*](#)

It's Not Just for Watching Silly Videos Now and Then. Gen Z "Can't Live Without" YouTube.

Ever heard of "[Charlie bit my finger](#)"? The [double rainbow all the way](#)? What about the outrage that occurred when Logan Paul posted a video of his reaction to someone who had [just committed suicide](#) (*strong language*)?

These are all what we might call "cultural events" that occurred on [YouTube](#), a social video sharing platform. At 1.5 billion, the [number of YouTube users](#) is not too far behind those on Facebook (2 billion), and [YouTube receives](#) more than 30 million visitors per day. Or for another way of looking at it, people around the globe are collectively watching [a billion hours of content on YouTube each day](#).

The days when you used to wait till Saturday night to watch your favorite show are long gone. This might be old news to you—after all, Netflix has grown pretty popular. But when asked which online service they couldn't "live without," [67% of users aged 13-24](#) named YouTube, with 85% saying it was something they regularly watch. YouTube easily surpassed Netflix, traditional TV, and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. So what's the appeal? What are they watching that they can't live without? What are all the different subscriptions now associated with it? How do we talk to them about it all? And most importantly, how do we teach our children to set healthy boundaries around all of their media usage, including YouTube?

—— **What is YouTube?**

Simply put, YouTube is a social media platform for sharing videos with people. Users can limit themselves to watching, liking, and commenting on other people's videos, or they can create their own channels and post their own. Former PayPal employees Jawed Karim, Steve Chen, and Chad Hurley [created YouTube in 2005](#). [This infographic](#) has some of the major highlights of YouTube's history up through 2012. Now a multibillion dollar company owned by Google, people use YouTube for just about anything you could imagine and for many purposes you never would. It's almost difficult to conceive of the internet without it.

—— **What can you watch on YouTube?**

The answer is so broad, it's rather difficult to answer. You can see your favorite movie clip, find out why everyone was talking about [Fergie's rendition of the National Anthem](#), or watch some guy named PewDiePie freak out while he plays video games. You can watch celebrities compete with Jimmy Fallon, discover how to fix something around your house, or giggle at adorable animals. Whether it's music videos, interviews with your favorite athletes, or news updates, you can find almost anything you want to see on YouTube.

YouTube is unique in: 1. its breadth and variety of content; and 2. how it has democratized who can gain fame and influence. One friend of ours believes that YouTube is the "most underrated influential platform of the day." A case in point is the popular TV series, *This Is Us*, whose Season 2 premiere in the fall of 2017 [drew 12.6 million viewers](#). If you look at [how many views YouTube star Logan Paul has been getting per day](#) (anywhere from around 2-12 million),

he is arguably far more influential. (YouTube stars are whole other conversation in and of themselves. We'll save that for a subsequent Guide.)

———— **How does it work?**

If you feel completely out of your depth when it comes to YouTube, [this resource from GCFLearnFree](#) gives a comprehensive, although slightly dated, explanation of what it is and what parents need to know.

Watching videos on YouTube is pretty straightforward. You simply go to the website, search for what you want to find, and click on whichever videos you want to view. When watching videos, you can expect to encounter ads and/or annotations, which are essentially pop-ups that people can add at various points in their videos. Whenever a YouTube video ends, another will start playing automatically. If you click “Cancel” to stop the next video from autoplaying, you'll see a grid of related videos you might be interested in watching next.

Anyone can watch videos on YouTube, but you have to sign in with your Google account if you want to comment on, like, or share them. Signing in also allows you to post your own videos.

You can also create playlists of your favorite videos, as well as subscribe to other users' YouTube channels. In addition to your desktop computer, YouTube can be accessed through the mobile app or through your smart TV.

———— **What's YouTube Red?**

[YouTube Red](#) is a subscription YouTube is offering in a few select countries, including the U.S. Basically, users can watch ad-free videos, as well as original TV shows with YouTube stars, even when not connected the internet. The subscription also includes access to Google Play Music and the ability to listen to videos with one's screen turned off. It starts at \$9.99/month, after a one-month free trial.

There's some confusion over [what YouTube Red is supposed to be](#): a platform similar to Netflix or Hulu, or one more like Spotify? While not pulling in large amounts of revenue at the moment, YouTube Red will soon be available to 100+ more countries than it currently is, so perhaps that broader availability will increase its popularity. Either way, for Gen Z, if their favorite YouTube stars are in a YouTube Red show, they will want a subscription.

———— **What's YouTube TV?**

An alternative to cable television (billing itself “cable-free live TV”), [YouTube TV](#) offers many of the shows and networks previously only available through traditional cable or satellite subscriptions (as well as all YouTube Red original shows and, [more recently, sports](#)). It costs \$40/month and is now available on various [smart TV devices](#), in addition to portable and handheld ones. It also offers the ability to record shows to a cloud-based DVR that has no storage limits.

Since its launch in 2017, YouTube TV has expanded to include more networks, providing the majority of Americans with access to local and cable networks on their devices. As it has

already been doing with its main platform, [YouTube is continuing to reinvent](#) “the television experience for the new generation.”

—— **What's YouTube Kids?**

As you might guess, YouTube developed [YouTube Kids](#) (YT Kids) for the purpose of giving kids a safer YouTube experience, since people can post whatever they want on YouTube (until they get reported or flagged). And because millions of people are on YouTube, it's not difficult to run across something inappropriate.

YT Kids purports to be a “world of learning and fun, made just for kids” and a “safer online experience.” The app does have a lot of [kid-friendly content on it](#): There are kids' shows like *Winnie the Pooh*, kids' songs, and educational material. Parents can create a profile with videos tailored for their kids and even set a time limit on how long their kids can be on the app. YT Kids has parental controls that enable parents to prevent their children from searching for videos on their own. **However, there is no way to block content in advance of encountering it. You have to block inappropriate videos as they come up.**

And inappropriate videos do come up on YT Kids. Certain people in the world like to create content that seems kid-friendly so that YouTube's algorithm doesn't flag it as inappropriate, then turns out to be disturbing. On the YT Kids homepage, YouTube even admits that “no system is perfect” and that videos do make it through that are not appropriate. CommonSense Media strongly recommends that you do not allow your children to search for videos on their own on YouTube Kids. They also recommend close supervision and that you watch videos with your kids as much as possible if you choose to let them use the app. We briefly looked into the app and noted that one of the shows featured heroines that were pretty sexualized.

It's been several months since YouTube came under criticism for inappropriate videos on YT Kids. But disturbing content [is still appearing there](#), with YouTube admitting that it needs to “do more.” If you'd rather go with a service that has tighter parental controls and closer oversight, check out the [apps listed here](#).

—— **Why do kids (and young adults) like YouTube?**

As a parent, it's easy to feel as though YouTube is just another app for you to worry about. It might seem like the only purpose of the platform is for your kids to waste time watching pointless videos. So what's good about it, and why do teenagers like it so much?

It's Easy to Consume, Educational, and Entertaining

One reason younger people like YouTube is that it's easy to consume. It only takes a few seconds to access, it's visual, and the videos don't require a huge time commitment since they are often only a few minutes long.

In addition, because the videos on it are free to watch (thanks, ads!...), it's given us much easier access to a wide range of educational content, much of which is excellent.

As we've already said, YouTube is a new form of entertainment. It's one of the main ways modern young people like to relax and unwind. See Common Sense Media's video “[What Kids Are Watching on YouTube](#)” to get a general idea of some of the most popular types of videos that teens enjoy watching. If you enjoy watching a show or a sports game on TV to relax,

that's really not that different from how kids are using YouTube. They're just using a different platform and format.

It's On Demand

Unlike broadcast TV, YouTube videos are always there, available to watch whenever a person wants to watch. Because one isn't required to be available at a prescribed time to view content, it offers a certain amount of control: I can watch what and when I want to and for as long as I want. This kind of control was unprecedented before YouTube, though platforms like Netflix and Amazon Video (and to a lesser extent Hulu) now offer similar control, though YouTube still has the edge in terms of sheer hours of content available and of types of content.

It's Cultural Aggregation

One of the biggest appeals of YouTube is that it's one of the main places where culture is "happening." If you want to know the latest news in pop culture and society at large, there are plenty of YouTubers who will collect the highlights and give commentary on them.

The biggest current cultural moments of our society, even if they don't originally air on YouTube, will make it there. These include presidential speeches, Super Bowl interviews, Olympic triumphs, and genuinely heroic moments, such as when pilot ["Sully" Sullenberger safely landed a plane](#) in the Hudson River. YouTube is a convenient platform for staying abreast of the events of the day.

It's Relatable and Authentic

Because YouTube is a social media platform, it has provided opportunities for people to have a voice who never would have before. It's made it much easier for the average person to gain a following and become famous.

The rising generation values authenticity and relationships. One result of these characteristics is that teenagers tend to trust the stars they follow on YouTube more than they trust traditional celebrities, partially because they feel that [YouTube stars are more relatable](#). Mainstream celebrities carefully craft an image or even keep their personal lives very hidden, but people who have made it on YouTube seem more authentic (whether or not they actually are) because they are more open and often willing to show more of their everyday lives. It's easy for teens to see YouTubers as their peers.

YouTube stars not only seem more relatable but often do engage with their fans more than the average celebrity does. And somewhat ironically, because people value YouTube so highly, people who react to culture on YouTube eventually become influencers of culture themselves, so users want to pay attention to them for that reason as well.

———— What are the dangers of YouTube?

Wasting Time

It's not uncommon for people to remark that they got on YouTube to watch a video and then let themselves be sucked into watching videos for hours on end. One 18-year-old girl we spoke to said she never got enough sleep and, when asked why, explained that it was because she had to be on YouTube making sure she didn't miss anything. She usually did this until 2 or 3am every day, regardless of whether she had school the next day. YouTube is in fact *designed* for this to happen. That's why another video automatically starts loading when the one you're watching is finished (though this autoplay feature [can be turned off](#)).

Beyond doing what you can to protect your kids from objectionable content, make sure you're

teaching them what good stewardship looks like. How can you help them develop good habits when it comes to how much time they spend on YouTube? How do we know when we've gotten too much of a good thing and it has become a bad thing?

Comments

Reading through the comments on YouTube is like studying the graffitied bathroom stalls of the internet. These comments almost always contain statements that are explicit, obscene, and offensive. Or, if they aren't vulgar, they're usually garbage. Allowing your children to read the comments will almost certainly expose them to graphic content, so we recommend enabling Restricted Mode in order to turn them off. See below for how to do so.

Explicit Content

One easy way to encounter inappropriate content on YouTube is in the advertisements that run before a video. It's also possible for the suggested videos that appear after a video ends to be inappropriate. Some users also like to "troll" by posting a video that looks safe and then cuts to something objectionable right in the middle of it.

As with many other social media apps, because there is so much content on YouTube, the platform [relies on users to police what gets uploaded](#). **Whenever system is run in this manner, mature content always gets through, so there's always the chance that kids will be exposed to it.** Website [Protect Young Minds notes](#) that YouTube actually tolerates explicit content, particularly if those posts are earning a lot of money. More on that below.

[YouTube recently announced](#) it's hiring 10,000 people to vet the platform for content that isn't supposed to be there. It remains to be seen whether this decision will make a significant difference in the type of material that is allowed.

Perverved Content That Seems Kid-Friendly

It's very important to not assume that YouTube channels that look kid-friendly are kid-friendly. There are channels that look like they are clearly [intended for kids](#) that have bizarre, violent, or sexual content in them. These videos range from being a bit strange to being perverse. If you look into the different videos on YouTube that have [Spiderman and Elsa](#) as characters (or search "Elsagate"—but be careful), you'll find that many of them are fairly weird. These videos are often published on channels with words like "toys" or "family" in them so that they seem safe.

One example is the channel Toy Monster, which has a video titled "[Frozen Elsa Becomes HAIRY!](#)" During the course of the video, Elsa's body and entire face gets covered in hair. Later in the video she almost accidentally eats a miniature version of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. There's no graphic content in the video, but it's really strange and not the sort of media anyone would want a young child watching.

But the above video is fairly tame compared to some of the other videos that look kid-friendly but depict depraved behavior. These videos have cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse or Elsa acting out various types of deviant and twisted behavior. [While this video](#) has strong language throughout, it does give a pretty good analysis of the offensive content that is targeted to kids and which YouTube not only doesn't censor but sometimes even promotes. It's worth watching, especially if your younger children use YouTube Kids.

It is possible to use YouTube and never run across content like this. We're not trying to scare you into never letting your kids use YouTube again. But we do want to give you fair warning of the dangers on the platform and emphasize the importance of you, the parent, vetting the content your younger children in particular are watching.

— What should I do?

Historically speaking, Christians have struggled with how to react to changes in culture. While it takes work, we recommend teaching your kids how to use YouTube wisely. Doing so will be more helpful than going to one extreme of banning it completely or the other extreme of letting them watch whatever they want. Obviously, when and how you decide to let your kids use YouTube will depend on how old they are and your assessment of their maturity. Here are some suggestions for steps to take in that regard.

Parental Controls

If you have young kids and opt to download YouTube Kids, don't allow them to search for videos on their own. Curate the videos for them, watching them ahead of time or at least watching them with your kids.

As far as YouTube itself goes, parental controls are helpful to a point. If you turn on Restricted Mode, it will hide the comments for you. [To turn on Restricted Mode](#), go to the YouTube menu and click on Settings. At the very bottom of the screen, you'll see the option to turn the Restricted Mode on or off.

Note that Restricted Mode will catch some of the worst content out there, such as excessive violence or nudity, but it will not catch all inappropriate content, as mentioned. Also, you might have Restricted Mode turned on for one browser, but someone could still use YouTube with Restricted Mode off by using a different browser, a private browsing tab, or a different account. Frankly, the only way you can be **absolutely** sure that your kids are not being exposed to mature content is by either watching videos before they do or by watching videos with them.

However, there are [a few other strategies](#) you can implement to have more oversight over what your kids are watching. You can turn off Autoplay, so that when one video is done, another doesn't immediately start playing. This will help prevent an inappropriate video from automatically starting. **To turn Autoplay off**, start playing any YouTube video. Then click on the gear icon at the bottom of the video. You'll see an option to toggle Autoplay on or off.

Another strategy is to subscribe to channels you know you're ok with your kids watching. You can also create playlists for them with videos you've already watched. Finally, you could also add a third-party filter. See our upcoming guide on internet filters for more information.

Sorry, Reviews Won't Help That Much

It would be great if someone could rate and review every YouTube channel that existed, but reviewing channels is possible only at a minimal level. Common Sense Media has [a review of the current Top Ten YouTubers](#), and *Business Insider* has [a list of the 19 most popular YouTube stars](#) at the time of this writing (remember—these will likely change before too long). You can also go to the website [Social Blade](#) for detailed metrics on the most popular YouTube channels, videos, and genres.

But the amount of content on YouTube is so extensive and diverse that your children almost certainly watch many other videos and channels besides the most well-known ones. It's simply not practical for people to evaluate YouTube channels in the same way they could write a movie review. Not only is the amount of content on YouTube enormous, but it also changes quickly. Even if you rated a popular influencer such as PewDiePie one year, [he could reinvent himself the next year](#), and your review would be obsolete.

We Need to Talk to Our Kids, No Matter How Old They Are

While we're not going to have advanced conversations with our younger children about what

they're watching, we think it's critical to prepare them for encountering inappropriate content online. **This is true even if we're doing everything we can think of to protect them from it.**

Think about how you would have a conversation to protect your kids in case they encounter a sexual predator. You wouldn't go into great detail, but you'd make sure they understand no one should say certain things to them or ask certain things of them. If anyone ever does, they should come to you immediately and not be afraid to tell you what happened.

Use a similar strategy when it comes to your kids going online, even if you are tightly controlling their internet use. Make sure your children know that if they see a video that disturbs or scares them, they can come to you and you won't be angry with them. If they hear words they don't understand, they should ask you what they mean. If they see someone's private parts, they should tell you and not be afraid. Having a conversation like this won't hurt anything, and you could end up protecting them in an unexpected situation.

It's essential they know that they can talk to you without fear. Countless people are accidentally exposed to online porn at young ages. They then develop addictions to it because they were curious and/or afraid to tell their parents. **It's no longer a question of if you need to have these conversations with your kids. You need to have them, with your girls as well as your boys.** Assume they will be exposed, and do everything you can to prepare them for that possibility.

What about Teens?

A good rule of thumb is: **Don't rely on anything in and of itself to filter out inappropriate content.** There is simply too much content for a third-party service to screen out everything that would be bad for your children to see.

Another rule of thumb that applies to all your kids on some level is: **Be aware of what videos your children are watching.** With your younger kids, you'll have more control over what they watch. With your older kids, you should try to be aware of what they're viewing and give them guidance. [Common Sense Media recommends](#) asking your older kids the following questions to get a sense of their online activity:

- What's trending today?
- What channels do you subscribe to?
- What's in your library?
- What was the last video you shared?

Engage with What They Love

Can you remember being a kid and loving something that your parents didn't understand or care about at all, like collecting baseball cards or playing Pac-Man at the video arcade? How much would it have meant (or did it mean) to you to have your parents really try to understand why you loved the music you did or what you enjoyed so much about your favorite hobby? In the same way, if your kids love a certain YouTuber or have a favorite video, ask them to tell you about it. Take the time to care and to understand why they like it. Even if the content is silly or immature, they will appreciate you making an effort to understand their world.

Here are some questions about YouTube you can discuss with your children:

- What do you like about YouTube?
- What do most of your friends like to watch on YouTube?
- What are some of your favorite videos on YouTube? Favorite channels? Favorite YouTubers?
- Have you ever learned anything new through YouTube?
- How do you think people are using YouTube in good ways?

- How have you seen people using YouTube in bad ways?
- Have you ever run across inappropriate content? What did you do?
- What if you started watching a video you thought you'd enjoy, but realized it contained disturbing, graphic, or otherwise inappropriate content? Would you click away, or would you keep watching it?
- How can you tell when a video is bad enough that you need to click away? What makes it hard to stop watching a video once you've begun?
- How can you tell when it's a bad idea to watch a video in the first place?
- What are some of the consequences of viewing graphic content?
- What's an example of a YouTube video that you think took something too far?
- What do you think is a reasonable amount of time to spend on YouTube?
- How can you guard against letting your time online consume your free time?
- How can your time on YouTube enhance your time off YouTube?

Disciple Them in Healthy Habits

In our [Guide to Smartphones](#), we recommended coming up with a contract with your teenagers for how they use their phones. Even if you don't want to be so formal with how you structure their time on YouTube, it's still good to make your expectations clear. Your kids should know what they should and shouldn't watch and what the consequences of breaking those rules will be.

Encourage healthy family habits overall when it comes to technology. **We recommend having a policy not to allow devices in bedrooms at night.** This rule will help you and your kids rest better (by not staring at a screen for hours before going to bed). And it will make it easier for your kids not to watch porn or other inappropriate content in private. You could also put limits on how much time they spend on the internet.

As always, pray, pray, pray. It's so easy to forget about the importance of prayer, and it can feel like we're not doing much when we do pray. But prayer is the most powerful and effective resource we have at our disposal. Pray that God would bring anything that your teenagers are hiding from you into the light. Pray for protection from the enemy. Pray for their hearts to be wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord. Pray for them to hate what God hates and love what He loves. Pray for them to use their time wisely.

Conclusion

Despite its dangers, YouTube is a good resource that can be used prudently. Filters and parental controls are helpful, not a one-stop solution. You will need to not assume anything about what is or isn't OK on YouTube, while guiding your children on how to use the platform well.

The most important point to remember is that God is ultimately and finally in control. When your kids push your boundaries and watch content they know they shouldn't, He will be faithful. He will provide the wisdom you need as you seek it from Him. Remember, He loves your kids even more than you do.

Additional Resources

[“Is it OK for My Kid to Start Her Own YouTube Channel?”](#) Common Sense Media

[“Positive Role Models on YouTube,”](#) Common Sense Media

[“Can YouTube Survive the Adpocalypse?”](#) *New York Magazine*

[“Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations”](#)

[“Yes, You Can Make Six Figures as a YouTube Star...and Still End Up Poor,”](#) *Business Insider*

[“How Many Views Does it Take to Make Money on YouTube?”](#) Video Power Marketing

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