

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about INSTAGRAM

AGE RESTRICTION
13+

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Instagram is a highly popular social media platform owned by Meta. It allows users to share photos and videos, post stories, send private messages, go live, explore public content, and interact with others worldwide. As a user-generated platform widely accessed in the UK, Instagram is directly affected by the Online Safety Act 2023, which places legal duties on platforms to better protect children from harm.

ADDICTIVE DESIGN

Instagram is designed to encourage prolonged engagement through endless scrolling, personalised recommendations, and social feedback such as 'likes' and comments. Young people may feel pressure to constantly check updates in case they miss out. Even with new regulatory duties, children can still lose track of time, affecting sleep, homework, and real-world relationships.

SCHEDULED AND DIRECT MESSAGES

Instagram allows users to schedule direct messages. While convenient, this can result in messages arriving late at night or early in the morning, disrupting sleep and increasing anxiety. Although UK regulation requires stronger protections against stranger contact, risks remain if children accept unknown followers or move conversations across platforms.

LIVESTREAMING AND PUBLIC EXPOSURE

'Going Live' enables real-time interaction with followers. If an account is public, broadcasts can potentially be viewed more widely, increasing exposure. Although under-16s face tighter restrictions and may require parental permission to use live features, livestreaming still carries risks, including inappropriate comments, pressure to perform, and unwanted contact.

THREADS AND PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

'Threads' is Instagram's linked, text-based platform, where posts can appear within the Instagram environment. It encourages participation in public conversations that may involve strangers. While parental controls may carry across, children can still encounter misinformation, hostile exchanges, or inappropriate content, particularly in trending or viral discussions.

META AI AND BLURRED BOUNDARIES

Instagram includes Meta AI chat features, allowing users to ask questions and receive responses. Young people may access inaccurate or unsuitable information, or begin to treat AI as a trusted companion. Although platforms are expected to reduce harmful outputs under UK law, AI systems can still provide misleading information and are not a substitute for real relationships.

EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Instagram centres around visibility and social approval. Not being tagged, receiving fewer likes, or being excluded from group chats can deeply affect a young person's sense of belonging. Even with the regulatory changes limiting harmful content and stranger messaging, peer comparison and online social hierarchies continue to impact young people's self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.

Advice for Parents & Educators

USE TEEN ACCOUNT PROTECTIONS

Ensure children sign up with their real age. Instagram's 'Teen Accounts' provide default private profiles for under-16s, restrict who can message them, and apply stronger content controls. Review messaging settings, nudity protection features, and live permissions together. Remember that safeguards are helpful but not foolproof, and regular review is essential.

TALK ABOUT THE LAW AND SAFETY

Discuss how the Online Safety Act is designed to protect children, while explaining that no system removes all risk. Help young people understand why age verification, private accounts, and restricted messaging matter. Encourage them to question content, report concerns, and recognise that platforms have legal duties but families and schools still play a key role.

Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator, and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian Government, comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.

SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Use Instagram's activity dashboard and built-in time management tools to agree daily limits. Consider device-free times, particularly before bed, to protect sleep. Scheduled messages and constant notifications can interrupt rest, so explore notification controls together and encourage balanced offline activities to reduce dependency.

KEEP COMMUNICATION OPEN

Create an environment where children feel comfortable discussing what they see or experience online. Talk about influencers, filters, AI chatbots, and online friendships – without judgement. Reinforce that AI tools are not real friends and that privacy matters. A calm, ongoing dialogue is far more effective than reacting only when problems arise.

