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New Technology Offer Kids, Teens Options for Private Photo- and Text-Sharing

Parents: Silicon Valley says it's heard you.

You're worried about embarrassing photos haunting kids into their adult years, and the high-tech industry has responded with a flood of new apps aimed to give smart-phone-toting children and teens more privacy and forgiveness of those missteps in safety-padded digital playgrounds.

The new technologies underscore one of the most vexing problems for parents in the digital age: How to help children make smart decisions in a landscape of devices and apps that seems to change overnight? Parents see how technology helps with schoolwork and communicating with friends and family. But they also fret about how to keep impulsive children from making potentially dangerous mistakes in online activities often done out of sight of parents or teachers.

Some of these apps could make it harder for parents to keep track of their kids' online activities. But the tradeoff the apps promise is the ability to make mistakes online without the consequences of those decisions sticking with kids for life on the Internet's biggest social-media sites.

On Snapchat and Wickr, users can exchange photos and texts that automatically self-destruct on the phones of the sender and receiver. Send a video or photo by text to a friend and set a timer for those images to disintegrate on both phones. The companies promise the photos aren't stored on their servers or sold to marketers eager to create profiles on young Internet users.

Tumblr and Formspring let users blog and comment on online forums without having to reveal their identities.

The new apps highlight a shift — people have become more careful about how they present themselves online. They are jittery about the digital footprints they leave on Facebook — and these concerns have led to less time spent on some of those social-media juggernauts, the companies say.

But tech and child-development experts warn that the newer services may not be as secure as they claim to be. A sexual photo, known as a "sext," can be spread quickly if it's grabbed via screenshot by a recipient or photographed by another phone. About 20 percent of teens said they engaged

in sexting, according to a 2009 study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

The apps are easy and alluring, but they have also sparked a debate among child-development experts about whether kids may be taking greater risks online. Because they believe their gossipy texts or videos of partying will vanish for good, they assume they won't be held accountable for sharing even the most intimate details of their lives on Facebook or Twitter.

"Unfortunately, where these apps run headlong into adolescent development is that kids easily believe bad things can't happen to them. It's the invulnerability and bullet-proof thing in adolescence that drives kids to take a few more drinks and then drive," said Michael Rich, the director of Harvard University's Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston.

Texting, Tumblr and Twitter are the "Three T's" that have drawn the most interest by teens, according to Stephen Balkam, head of the Family Online Safety Institute. He said his 16-year-old daughter has a Facebook account but is careful about her image there, knowing her parents and future college admissions boards could research her online history.

But on apps that provide temporary and morsel-sized bits of content-sharing, it's easy to act more like a teen — coordinating meet-ups, sharing goofy and maybe inappropriate photos — and leaving no trace behind.

This all comes as children and teens have become the fastest-growing adopters of smartphones and tablets. In a Nielsen survey conducted in July, 58 percent of teens who own mobile phones have smartphones, up from 36 percent the previous year.

Not only are kids online at home, they are surrounded by mobile devices throughout the school day. Many schools have no-cellphone policies, but metropolitan school districts, from Arlington County to Los Angeles, have invested tens of millions of dollars into tablet programs where teachers are increasingly communicating with kids over social networks.

Ninety percent of teens said they used social media, and the majority of those users check into Facebook or other social networks every day, according to a July 2012 study by child advocacy group Common Sense Media.

“Kids are getting smartphones at younger and younger ages,” Balkam said. “And what parents have to realize is that these iPhones and other devices are very powerful mobile computers.”

More recently, children have spent less time on the biggest social networks, some experts say.

“We believe that some of our users, particularly our younger users, are aware of and actively engaging with other products and services similar to, or as a substitute for, Facebook,” the social network’s co-founder Mark Zuckerberg wrote recently in the firm’s annual report.

“For example, we believe that some of our users have reduced their engagement with Facebook in favor of increased engagement with other products and services such as Instagram,” he wrote.

Part of the reason may be concerns by teens of the permanent social-media profiles they have developed on the site, Google+ and Twitter. Teens have been warned by their parents that those status updates may come back to haunt them years later.

Rich said he lectures his child patients to do to “the grandma test”: If grandma wouldn’t approve of the video or news story you are about to share, don’t do it.

Researchers at Pew are working on a report about a survey that will be released this spring that shows teens are more concerned about their reputations online. They want to “curate” their image and are more careful about protecting their privacy.

For them, the answer to such concerns are ephemeral apps such as Snapchat and a similar self-destruct-messaging software by Facebook called Poke, the researchers say.

“They may want to share with a friend or cousin a conversation or photo that isn’t a big deal, that doesn’t need to be permanently captured on the Web,” said Amanda Lenhardt, a researcher and director of teens and technology at the Pew Research Center.

Snapchat was one of the most popular free apps for iPhones and Android users last year. The Los Angeles-based company did not respond to questions about its policy toward young users. Snapchat’s rules don’t allow users under 13, but it’s unclear how this is enforced. Millions of kids are believed to use Facebook and other social-media sites by claiming to be older to meet age-limit restrictions.

Wickr, a San Francisco-based firm, launched its own encrypted-software program that also self-destructs with children in mind. Wickr doesn’t restrict its technology by age and doesn’t collect any personal information on kids.

Co-founder Nico Sell, a mother of two school-age girls, said she wanted to create an alternative to Facebook that would allow children to communicate freely with friends and family. If users choose, those messages disappear from the company’s servers, and any metadata such as geo-location tags are wiped clean, too.

Launched last September, Wickr has become popular among law enforcement, political dissidents and journalists, Sell said. Those users, and the people who communicate with them, often depend on anonymity for their safety and don’t want to leave a trail of messages.

But she admits there isn’t a fool-proof technological safeguard from people saving images with screenshots. “There is no magic pill for betrayal,” Sell said.

Those are complicated interactions for a child or teen, still sorting out social norms that are increasingly being played out online, experts say.

“These are tricky questions because these apps assume the sender and recipient are both on the same page on their desire for photos and texts to self-destruct,” said Caroline Knorr, parenting editor at the Web site for Common Sense Media.

“Kids have a hard time understanding that,” she said, “and it’s a lot to expect of them, too.”