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## [Apps to Watch as Kids Return to School](#)

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As schools reopen for the new year, many students will arrive with smartphones in their pockets or backpacks, loaded with apps that can create headaches for parents, teachers, and administrators. Some apps, by design, allow kids to hide images and data, and even the existence of the apps themselves. Many apps cost nothing and require no age verification (or verification via a simple check mark). Depending on their content and design, apps can cause disruption at school, and some can be downright dangerous.

Social media apps remain popular with students as well as adults. Twitter, with its 140-character maximum, provides a virtually uncontrolled space for pornography and “trolling.” Instagram, where users share photos and videos, can easily be used for inappropriate images. Fake Instagram accounts (“finstagram”) are commonly used to hide account holders’ identity from adults. Snapchat is more popular than ever, and a recent Associated Press survey estimated that 75% of teens use Snapchat. Given users’ ability to limit the duration of messages, Snapchat remains a common platform for sexting and cyber-bullying that cannot be tracked. In June 2017 Snapchat added a “Snap Map” feature that allows the app’s users to view other users’ locations on a real map. To alleviate the obvious safety concerns this new feature presents, “Snap Map” sharing settings can be adjusted to a feature called “Ghost Mode” to conceal the user’s location; however, this feature must be affirmatively selected by the user.

The free online chat site Omegle offers to let users meet the “cool people” who populate the Internet. Chats take place anonymously with a “stranger,” and can include videos, many of which depict nudity. After School describes itself as a “private space for you and your school” where users can post anonymously or using their names, and “find fun stuff” or “embarrassing stories” about their friends. House Party, launched in 2016, has more than 1 million users, mostly teens. It allows the user to chat with up to eight people at once via a split screen feature to create a party-like atmosphere. Like most of these apps, House Party has no age verification process, and it permits spontaneous video chats with strangers.

Apps that allow anonymity tend to encourage bad behavior and bullying by freeing users from fear of consequences from peers or adults. Many of these trendy apps spike in popularity and then just as quickly meet their demise. Yik Yak, the 5-mile radius app popular with college students, was once valued at \$400 million but shut down in April 2017. It had been banned from many schools because of rampant cyber abuse and harassment. Similar apps like Formspring and Secret have also shut down in recent years.

Dating apps intended for use by adults are increasingly popular with teenagers. Tinder, for example, estimates about 7% of its users are age 13 to 17. Down offers a “secret way” to “hook up” with other users nearby. Hot or Not (where males rate users based on posted photos) purports to be limited to users 13 or older and claims users from 13 to 17 cannot chat or share images with older users, but the app has no means of verifying users’ ages.

Keeping up with the latest apps and preventing inappropriate use by students pose ongoing challenges in the digital age. Teachers and school officials must remain vigilant to protect students amid these online risks, even as enforcement becomes more difficult. And they need to consider applicable school rules and privacy considerations before searching or confiscating a student’s smartphone or other device. If a device is believed to contain child pornography, a prudent approach is to notify law enforcement. Schools should communicate with legal counsel in any questionable situations.

TAGS: [After School](#), [apps](#), [Down](#), [Formspring](#), [Hot or Not](#), [House Party](#), [Instagram](#), [Omegle](#), [Smartphones](#), [SnapChat](#), [Social Media apps](#), [Tinder](#), [Twitter](#)

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