



February 7, 2014

Dear Hillview Families,

Last April I published a brief article about Instagram in response to some issues around this social media tool that were arising at Hillview. To read the *Instagrammar* article, go to <http://tinyurl.com/mop5jol>

The feedback from the community about this piece was overwhelmingly positive, pointing to how important it is to return to this subject periodically. More than ever, parents need to keep abreast of the ever-changing world of teen and pre-teen social media. Our “digital native” students are often two steps ahead of their “digital immigrant” parents, and we may not be aware of what sites and apps they are spending time on, nor of the risks some of these tools pose. Even since last April, a mere eight months ago, the digital landscape for our students has evolved. Instagram has added new features, including the capacity to share video, and also a “direct message” feature where users can communicate to each other in a fashion similar to texting. The title of this piece, “App-prehension, alludes to what many of us may be feeling: How can we possibly keep up with all the Apps and tools are kids are using, while at the same time keeping our kids safe from harm and from making mistakes?

A disclaimer before continuing: Instagram or any of the other apps I’ll discuss below (perhaps with the exception of Ask.fm) are not inherently diabolical. They are valid means for the millennial generation to connect, communicate, and share. We also cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Smartphones, iPads, and computers define our students’ interactions; more than any other generation, our students embrace technology and integrate it into their daily lives. It’s not an add-on to them, but rather part of the fabric of their world.

Returning to Instagram very briefly, we saw a big change in our students’ presence on this site after the *Instagrammar* article came out. Many accounts that had been public became private. Many accounts that had content of a questionable nature went down. Some of this was undoubtedly due to families engaging their students in conversations about the importance of privacy and about maintaining a responsible digital footprint. Some of the response we also owe to a visit from McAfee, who generously visited Hillview and provided a thought-provoking and at times sobering assembly about staying safe online and making good choices. That said, some of our students still have public Instagram accounts and share a lot of personal information. Does your child have an Instagram account? If so, is it public for anyone to see? We encourage you to sign up for Instagram and search (it’s super fast and easy). If you find your child has a public account, this can be a good point of discussion for online safety. See the *Instagrammar* article for more details.

The following Apps/sites are the ones that seem to be trending right now, with lots of our students using them regularly to communicate and share content:

- ask.fm
- Snapchat and its kryptonite, Snap Save
- Spycalc
- Vine
- Kik Messenger

Again, they are not in and of themselves evil, but each has its potential pitfalls.



Ask.fm is an app and web-based forum where users sign up and build networks of friends and acquaintances, much like one does on Instagram. Ask.fm is rated 12+, and the best way to describe it is allows others to ask you *anonymous* questions. People search you, they post a question on your Ask.fm page, and you answer it. Many of our students include a link to their Ask.fm account on their Instagram home page to allow easier access. As you might imagine, the fact that “askers” most often remain anonymous can lead to trouble. The virtual interactions on the Internet are already far removed from a face-to-face conversation; this is why it sometimes much easier for kids to be unkind to each other online, and why they post things that they would never say to someone’s face. When these interactions are further cloaked by anonymity, the questions on Ask.fm can very quickly get mean, profane, sexually explicit, or all of the above.

Like Instagram, Ask.fm is searchable. One way you can check to see if your child has an Ask.fm account (aside for looking for the App icon on his or her smartphone) is to do a Google search that includes “Ask.fm” plus your child’s name. You can also create your own Ask.fm account and search within the app to find your child’s account.

Ask.fm is tailor-made for cyber-bullies and “trolls” (those who may not know the user, but search for opportunities to demean others), and anyone with an Ask.fm account leaves him- or herself open to abuse. At Hillview, we have counseled students who have received very hurtful questions on Ask.fm, and there are plenty of stories in the media about students whose Ask.fm accounts are cited as the main reason for self-harm. The questions we would pose to students who have Ask.fm accounts is, “How does anonymity add value to your communications? Wouldn’t it be better to restrict your interactions to people you know and trust, as opposed to opening up your profile to anyone and everyone? Is it worth it to open yourself up to potentially demeaning comments for the ‘sensation’ of an anonymous question?”



This harmless-looking ghosty is the icon for Snapchat, the app that allows the user to send a photo that disappears after a pre-determined number of seconds. Why a ghost? Snapchat might say it represents the fleeting nature of the image, but I’d argue that it’s because the image(s) sent via Snapchat may come back to “haunt” the sender. The big concern for most parents around Snapchat is that it’s a “sexting” App; in other words, kids will use it to send explicit images. In truth, Snapchat is more often used to send silly pictures than risqué images. Nevertheless, no one should be fooled into thinking a Snapchat image will “self-destruct.” Not only can the recipient take a screenshot of the image, but now there are numerous apps that allow the recipients of “Snaps” to save them without even opening them, Snap Save being but one of them. Snapchat has even put a disclaimer in the App Store: “Please note: even though Snaps are deleted from our servers after they are viewed, we cannot prevent the recipient(s) from capturing and saving the message by taking a screenshot or using an image capture device.”

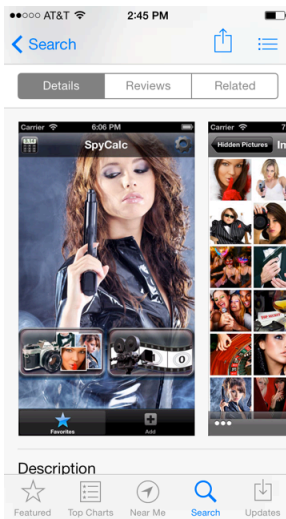
You should know that at Hillview, we have dealt with issues around Snapchat, both in terms of students sending images that they thought would disappear, and also in terms of

these images being captured and saved by recipients using Snap Save. As with Ask.fm, where we might wonder why an anonymous question is any more interesting than a “real” question, with Snapchat we might wonder why one would want to send a “temporary” picture as opposed to a “permanent” one. But clearly there’s something compelling to our teens and pre-teens about this form of communication. The drawback is that these communication tools provide a false sense of security; the perceived cloak of anonymity or impermanence may lead to unhealthy risk-taking.

Snapchat makes its pitch to potential users by arguing, “The allure of fleeting messages reminds us about friendship – we don’t need a reason to stay in touch.” Huh? Does that even make sense? It would be interesting to ask our children what they think about this claim, and what friendship really means.



Does your child have Snap Save on his or her phone? If so, what is the purpose of having an image capture app like this for photos that the sender may believe will be impermanent? We argue that this app and others like it have no other function but to capture an image that was sent in confidence, and with the expectation that it would not endure. And if one were to save an image in this fashion, what would the purpose be behind that? Some possible reasons are to circulate content that is potentially harmful to someone’s reputation, or perhaps to hold it over their heads as a form of blackmail.



Spycalc is yet another app that we’ve come across that we want parents to be aware of. You may from time to time access your child’s Smartphone to see what pictures might be on the camera roll. But some pictures may be stashed elsewhere, providing an extra level of protection. On a Smartphone screen, Spycalc looks like a perfectly harmless calculator, and by default is named “Digit Calc.” But looks can be deceiving. The way this app works is that the user enters a four-digit code, both preceded and followed by a decimal point, and voilà - a secret cache is revealed for storing pictures and video. Some rhetorical questions: Why would anyone need a place to hide pictures or video? What would the nature of such photos or video be? Spycalc’s pitch is, “Keep the

memories, hide the evidence.” Now, not always are hidden things – be they digital photos or physical items – necessarily illicit, but given the ease of access on the Internet to all manner of X-rated material, apps such as Spycalc may encourage our students to keep on their phones images or videos containing so-called “mature content.” While this article focuses on Spycalc, it is not the only app or Smartphone feature that provides a “hidden compartment” for photos and video.



Judging by trends among Hillview students, Vine is the newer, cooler version of Instagram. Vine is a social media platform where students can share six-second looping videos with each other. The app is 17+, but all that is required for an account is “Tap OK to confirm that you are 17 or over.” Sometimes the video is original content posted by the user, and other times, students are finding funny videos out there and “re-vining” them. Like Instagram, the user defines whether the Vine account is public or restricted to known friends. Also, like Instagram, followers post comments on the video content. Vine is searchable, so if you – as the parent- create a Vine account, you can search within the app for your child’s name, or you can do a Google search with “Vine” plus your child’s name. All too often our students use their real names, so they are easily findable (What I love to see is the padlock icon, with the phrase, “This person’s profile is protected”). Once you are in one student’s account, you can click on the user names of followers who have commented and jump to their accounts. The content can often be innocuous – a puppy dog or someone playing music, for example. At other times, students are posting actual video of themselves and friends, or they are posting content of a questionable nature. If the former, a good question for our children is, “Do you realize that anyone can find this video and learn personal information about you or your friends?” If the latter, a good question is, “What will others think about you when they see that you have posted \_\_\_\_\_?”



There are so many ways for our kids to communicate. They email, text, and send “direct messages” over Instagram. But there are other messaging apps that don’t show up on the texting bill. Kik Messenger is one of those apps, and Common Sense Media (a highly recommended parent resource for all things digital) describes Kik as “an app-based alternative to standard texting as well as social networking app for smartphones.” Like Vine, it’s free, and prompts the user to “Tap OK to confirm that you are 17 or over” (In their help materials, Kik states that students 13 – 18 should obtain parent permission for an account).

With Kik, the user builds networks of contacts and keeps in touch via this messaging app. One of Kik’s features is Address Book Matching, meaning that when you set up an account, Kik will determine who among your contacts also has Kik and alert each other. But students can also be careless with their usernames, either creating ones that are their actual names, or sometimes posting their Kik “handle” in other venues where it can be captured. Common Sense Media warns, “this multi-feature (read: potentially more ways to get into trouble) tool is for older teens and adults...teens need some guidance on safety and privacy if they are going to use it.”

At Hillview, students and parents have shared with us instances of cyber bullying that have occurred over Kik. The bully creates a fictitious account and then texts hurtful messages to a target. The user has some recourse in these cases: she can ignore new people, thus keeping the communication within known groups of friends; he can block a particular account that may be the source of hurtful messages; and finally, she can report content that violates Kik's AUP by sending a message to Kik. There are fewer tools on Kik than on other social networking apps for reporting abuse, probably because Kik is intended for older audiences. For more parent resources on Kik, go to <http://tinyurl.com/ldkms4w>



The apps described above are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what may be on your child's smart device. No article can be comprehensive enough to describe *all* apps that may create issues for our children. But there is an amazing resource in the form of Common Sense Media (<http://www.common sense media.org/>). Not only does Common Sense Media rate and describe apps, it's also a resource for popular music, movies, video games, and books. It's amazing to me that this resource is free; I think most parents would be willing to pay for such an all-inclusive service to help them navigate the avalanche of media that our teens and pre-teens consume. You can also get the app (the icon is above) for your smartphone or tablet.

Another resource we'd love you to take advantage of is Menlo Park City School District's parent education series. ***This coming Wednesday, February 12, Erica Pelavin and Gloria Moskowitz-Sweet from My Digital Tat2 will present from 6:30 – 8:30 in Hillview's Performing Arts Center.*** Their mission is "to help educators, parents, and students work together to create a community of kindness and respect both on and offline. Our goal is to help students see the power and responsibility associated with 'living out loud' in the digital world while empowering them to be 21st century learners who are ethical and responsible producers and consumers of digital media." This presentation will be geared toward parents, and the presentation will help us better guide our children and students safely and responsibly through their ever-changing world of social media. We hope to see you there!

Best regards,

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