

## WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR TWEEN'S INSTAGRAM

I follow a middle school Instagram star.

She's the daughter of one of my oldest friends, and nearly every picture she posts gets dozens and dozens of likes and comments. She has about 500 followers and has posted hundreds of adorable pictures of herself and her friends, who likely would never end up on a cyberbullying list like the "Ladue's Ugliest" account that caught school officials and parents' attention last week. (That account user posted pictures of people deemed unattractive.)

Instagram is where your tween hangs out. It's essentially a photo-based social network, like Facebook and Twitter, but it is accessed as an app downloaded on an iTouch, iPad or smartphone. Technically, a user has to be 13 to download and use it according to the site's regulations, but those rules haven't stopped many tweens from signing up.

I started following the accounts of my close friends' children, largely to keep tabs and alert their parents if I saw something questionable. Some of their children blocked me. (The whole point is to keep grown-ups away, right?) Others, as young as 6 years old, enthusiastically began "liking" my own pictures, which also made me feel a little odd. How did I end up with this strange digital interaction with a first-grader?

Instagram is not just a glorified camera with filters to make pretty photos and collages. For many tweens, it's a way around parents who monitor or restrict accounts on Facebook but aren't as familiar with Instagram. It's a way to post sexy self-portraits, flirt, keep an eye on others and feel popular.

Children about to enter



those turbulent teen years have always sought secret places to explore their evolving identities. The trouble with Instagram is that this hidden space is completely public. How many 10- or 12-year-olds actually have 200-300 "friends?" What child should publicize a stream of photos documenting her life and thoughts for hundreds of others? Perhaps because so many adults have adopted socializing in this manner, it's considered acceptable for children.

But those aren't friends. That's an audience.

Are we comfortable letting our children explore their developing sense of self, their sexuality and friendships in a photographic record in front of an audience? Would we allow them to tape pictures of themselves outside our front doors?

At an age when popularity matters so very much, Instagram offers an easy metric for children: How many people "like" your photos, how many comments do you get, how many followers do you have? But it's dangerous to measure self-worth through a phone.

It's creepy when people you hardly know can see dreamy pictures of your 11-year-old in her bedroom. It's unnerving that anyone can spy on her conversations with her BFFs.

Perhaps even worse, however, is how all this personal information might be used by

the corporations who control it. Instagram, purchased by Facebook, created an Internet furor recently when it announced it was changing its privacy policies in a way that may have allowed users' photos to be sold to advertisers. It's backed off those original changes, but new policies went into effect Saturday. It's inevitable that the app will incorporate ads to some extent in the near future.

An account can be set to private to restrict who views one's pictures, but it's naive to think all this rich data aren't being collected for future commercial purposes.

As if the tween and teen years aren't difficult and awkward enough, now our children get to portray those personal dramas for an audience, have those moments used to sell products and expose private humiliations to live forever?

Even though it's the foolish and cruel behavior of children that captures headlines and our attention, that's the barely visible tip of what our worries should be. Most of our children will not engage or be featured on ugly lists. Most of our children will not be kidnapped or hurt by a stranger who found them through a social network. But, most of them will feel pressured or the desire to connect with their friends through images shared on their devices.

It's OK to say no. It's OK to make their accounts private and block anyone you don't know as a follower. It's imperative to tell them that a picture they post on Instagram is akin to posting it on a billboard at school. A billboard that never goes away.