

Practical Tech Tips for Christian Families

Bill Lovegrove, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, May 22, 2022

The internet is huge and constantly changing. Any list like this is incomplete and will quickly be out of date. But this is a snapshot of many of the most popular apps and tools in 2022, along with some tips and suggestions. Many of these apps change frequently, and can be used in multiple ways, and I haven't personally used all of them, so the descriptions may not be entirely accurate.

ACCOUNTABILITY OR FILTERING SOFTWARE

Filtering means you are blocked from visiting internet sites suspected of being bad. Accountability means that another person gets reports about your internet use. No filter can possibly block everything bad, but they can keep you from stumbling across some of the bad stuff. Accountability is helpful for resisting the temptation to misuse the internet, because you know someone is (at least potentially) watching.

These filters are primarily for internet browsing. Some also protect emails and texts. No current app can filter content in other apps like Instagram or TikTok.

Note that most browsers and websites and apps are trying hard to track you and everything you do. Even if you have no accountability tools installed, what you do online is far from secret and can become public in embarrassing ways.

Your home computer, your phone, and your internet service provider probably have some built-in filtering and/or accountability tools that are free and can be very helpful.

The church currently uses the following two add-on apps for personal computers and mobile devices:



[Accountable2You](#) – Accountability Only



[CovenantEyes](#) – One of the most popular filtering and accountability apps

Other available tools include:



[Canopy App || Parental Control & Real-Time Internet Filter](#)



[Microsoft Family Safety: Location Sharing & Screen Time App](#)

USE A SAFER BROWSER



Google Chrome is probably the **least** safe from a privacy point of view and famously has lots of tracking features. It encourages you to log in to your Google account for even more sophisticated tracking. Using Chrome while logged out is safer, and many privacy settings can be adjusted if you dig through the settings.



[Firefox](#) is a popular browser with an emphasis on privacy features.



[Microsoft Edge](#), the default browser on Windows machines, has a few more privacy features than Chrome, but aggressively tries to get you connected to the Microsoft ecosystem.



The [Brave](#) browser is even more focused on privacy and has a built-in ad blocker.



The [Tor](#) browser is the most secure and the favorite of people looking for advanced privacy protection.

NON-TRACKING SEARCH ENGINES

Several search engines are available that, unlike Google or Bing, don't try to track your search history. Two of the most popular are listed below. You can set these as the default search engine on most browsers including Google Chrome.



[DuckDuckGo](#)

DuckDuckGo

[Startpage.com](#)

[StartPage](#)

FILTERING OPTIONS AT IMAGE WEBSITES

[Google](#)
Images

[SafeSearch](#)

[pixabay](#)

Pixabay (free public domain images) [SafeSearch](#)

SAFER BROWSER SETTINGS AND ADD-ONS

[Clear cookies](#) occasionally or every time you exit.



AdblockPlus

[AdBlock Plus](#) works on most browsers

DISTRACTION REDUCTION SOFTWARE



[FocusMe™ – Official | The Best Website Blocker & Focus App](#)



[Freedom - Block Websites, Apps, and the Internet](#)

Reducing Digital Distraction [The REDD Project](#)

CONTROLLING PHONES

Just because you have a smart phone doesn't mean that everything has to be accessible on it; you might want to limit what your phone can do, or what your child's phone can do. This can include:

- Setting a password so that apps cannot be installed or settings changed without that password.
- Removing or disabling browser apps so the phone can't be used for browsing.
- Using one of the distraction-reduction tools above.
- Turning off notifications so you do not get interrupted and are not tempted to constantly follow what is happening in the apps.
- If some app like Facebook or YouTube is tempting you to spend too much time or distracting you, limit its use to your desktop and don't install the app on your phone.

In addition, a wide variety of phones are still available with limited features, including phones that can only call or text with no apps and no internet access at all. They have the added advantages of being much cheaper and have longer battery life. These are sometimes called "feature phones" or "dumb phones." Some are designed particularly with children in mind. Below are just a few of many available models, and these will change rapidly.



[Orbic Journey V Flip Phone](#)



[Gabb Phone](#)



[Nokia 3310](#)

Another option that is growing in popularity is to give your child a smart watch rather than a phone. If your concern is just accountability and tracking and the ability to call or message, this can be a good solution.



[Gizmo Watch 2](#)





[Gabb Watch](#)

TIPS FOR PARTICULAR APPS

This list contains just a sampling of the most popular social media apps and games, with brief descriptions and some opinions about each. They range from relatively safe to highly objectionable, but their popularity means you and your children may be hearing about them.

CALL OF DUTY **Call of Duty** is one of the most popular “first person shooter” games. The non-stop hyper-realistic graphic violence in the M-rated game is extreme, along with the psychological impact of constantly killing people on screen. It can be played alone but is usually played multiplayer, with all the risks of interacting with strangers. Similar games include *Doom*, *Halo*, and many more.

 **Discord** is a text, voice, and video chat platform for groups of users with a particular interest. Unlike broad public forums like Reddit, it contains many small private invitation-only groups such as a school team or work group. In this use there are no ads and no random posts from strangers; it is fairly safe. However, it is also popular with gamers and has large public groups for many popular games, which are a wide open “talk with strangers” situation.

 **Facebook** is not particularly popular with teens, attracting an older crowd. If you make your page private and only “friend” people who are actually friends, your feed will contain things your friends post along with LOTS of advertisements and random posts from strangers.

Avoid the temptation to click on all the junk and clickbait, or you will get more and more. In fact, you shouldn’t even read it, because lingering over a post without liking or clicking on it is noticed by Facebook. Facebook is a master of figuring out what interests you and delivering an endless stream of it, with ads mixed in.

The infinite news feed never ends; if you keep scrolling, Facebook will show you more and more posts forever. This and the personalized feed make it highly addictive.

FORTNITE **Fortnite** is one of the most popular games today. It is a multiplayer game, and you can play along with and chat with complete strangers, with all the risk that brings. Bullying and trash talk are common. Female characters can be immodest. It’s a battle game, so you spend most of your time killing things, but it’s more cartoony than the hyper-realistic first-person shooter games. It has several

different modes where you play with or against other people. Like many games today, it has things in the game to spend money on.



Instagram is primarily for photo sharing, especially glamour (look how attractive I am) and bragging (look what I did today). But it is also popular with artists and people interested in art, and special interest groups. Don't even start down the road of collecting followers and counting likes and trying to be popular here. Sharing public photos is an invitation to predators.



Minecraft is a cartoony building-block world. In single-player mode it is fairly harmless, and can be educational, although it carries the usual risks of wasting time and addiction. In multi-player mode it is "talking with strangers" in the broadest sense, and opens the door to predators and pornography and bad social influence. The ability to construct custom avatars and create environments makes bad content possible.



Netflix and other streaming video services (including Disney+, Hulu, Prime, Peacock, and many more) offer huge collections of movies and TV shows on demand. However, they offer *different* collections, leading to the need to subscribe to several to see everything someone might want to see. Netflix pioneered, and many streaming video sources have copied, the automatic loading of another video when one finishes, as well as the release of entire seasons of shows at once, both encouraging "binge watching." Searching "Netflix addiction" will return 5 million results, evidence that many people are talking about the addictive nature of these platforms, especially among young adults.



Pinterest is photo sharing by theme. Especially popular themes are crafts, cooking, fashion, home styles. Browsing other people's boards is much like browsing the internet at large, but Pinterest has many social features like making your own public board, pinning things to it, and group boards. All of these features come with the general dangers of interacting with strangers. Beware of scams and fake accounts.



Reddits are discussion forums on thousands of individual topics known as subreddits. It is the ultimate "talking with strangers," with all the good and bad that comes along. It might be a good way to follow a niche hobby, but most of the discussion on important topics is poor quality and unfiltered.



Roblox is a game-building sandbox where players can create their own games (fairly harmless), and chat with other people and play their games (dangerous). The use of a user-designed avatar representing you on screen and the ability to build objects opens the door for wildly inappropriate content. Many children have trouble limiting their time spent on this game.



Shapchat is for sharing quick photos, often with captions or crazy edits, that disappear if you don't see them quickly. It is one of the social media sites most driven by FOMO (fear of missing out); you have to check it frequently or you will miss out. It was a craze in the 2010's and has fallen out of favor somewhat but still used by a lot of teens.



TikTok is primarily an entertainment site, and much of the entertainment is not wholesome: dance videos, lip sync with pop music, teen age dares, pranks, embarrassing moments, dark topics like suicide, etc.



Tinder is the most popular dating app, and it matches you up with random strangers for dates. Obviously not appropriate for Christian young people looking for a mate, and especially not for minors.



Twitter is primarily a broadcast medium, and not a good conversation tool. There is little reason for a child or teen to post there. Tweets are short, making good conversation difficult, and people's manners are terrible here. It can be educational to follow some select people in an area of interest, but as with all social media you will get ads and random posts, and can get sucked into lots of other things.

Virtual Reality

This is a category of social media sites and games you play with a headset on, and an avatar representing you is visible on-screen to you and possibly other players. These range from the educational and harmless *Microsoft Flight Simulator* to first-person shooter games like *Doom VR* and the wide-open world of *RecRoom* and *VRChat*, with widespread adult content and unwholesome interactions. With whole-body avatars, interactions can be more traumatic and abusive. Your kids probably shouldn't be trying this out without constant parental involvement. In addition to content issues, extended use of VR headsets can cause nausea, headaches, eye strain, and other kinds of "cyber sickness."



Like all social media, **YouTube** is advertiser funded and you will see lots of ads. YouTube is aggressive about figuring out what kinds of videos you like and suggesting more and more. This is a good reason not to ever click on an inappropriate video, not even for a second.