



Decoding Teen Talk: A Parent's Guide to Slang, Emojis & Digital Safety



Created by ARC and local teens to help
support parents and facilitate safer,
healthier conversations

Why this matters

Teenagers are constantly finding new ways to express themselves – often in code. From slang to emojis, the way young people communicate today can sometimes hide conversations about sex, drugs, mental health struggles, or risky behaviours.

Today's teens are growing up in a world that looks very different from the one many parents knew. Unlike previous generations, teens now live part of their lives online – which means they may face new risks, pressures, and influences that parents didn't experience growing up. With technology, social media, and slang evolving faster than ever, it can feel unfamiliar or even overwhelming.

At ARC Counselling, we believe that open communication starts with understanding and empathy. Our goal is to help parents decode the language of today's teens, so they can respond with support, not suspicion.

This guide will help you:

- Recognise slang and emojis that may signal risky behaviour
- Understand online platforms where teens may hide content
- Learn how digital culture affects mental health and safety
- Approach sensitive topics with compassion and confidence

Remember, not every emoji or slang word means something harmful – but when combined with secrecy, behaviour changes, or emotional distress, they can be important clues. Stay curious. Stay connected.





Slang to watch

Here's a breakdown of slang teens are using today, grouped by category. Context is key – don't panic if you see one of these words, but if it's paired with secrecy, emotional changes or risky behaviour, it might be time to talk.

Sexual References

- “Smash” - To have sex
- “Link” - To meet or hook up
- “Sneaky link” - A secret sexual partner
- “Body count” - Number of sexual partners
- “Thirst trap” - A provocative selfie/post for attention
- “Glow up” - Physical transformation, often sexualised
- “DTF” - Down To F***
- “Freaky” - Sexually adventurous
- “Raw” - Sexual intercourse without the use of protection
- “WYLL” or “WDYLL” - “What do you look like?”
- “NSFW” - “Not safe for work” i.e. 18+ content.

Drugs & Alcohol

- “Zaza” - Strong weed/cannabis
- “Gardening” - Often used to describe smoking cannabis
- “Plug” - Drug dealer
- “Lean” - Codeine-based drink (with soda)
- “Snow” or “Yayo” - Cocaine
- “Rolling” - High on ecstasy (MDMA)
- “Tripping” - Hallucinating on LSD or mushrooms
- “Skrrt” - Leaving fast (often from trouble)
- “Sesh” - A party, often with drugs/alcohol










Mental Health & Self-Harm

- “Ana” - Anorexia (personified)
- “Mia” - Bulimia (personified)
- “ED” - Eating disorder
- “0 cal” or “fasting” - Extreme dieting or disordered eating
- “Sh” or “Blades” - Self-harm
- “Void” - Feeling numb or mentally checked out
- “Unalive” or ‘off’ or ‘off myself’ - Talking about suicide













Emoji Decoder

Teens use emojis as code – sometimes humorously, sometimes to disguise sensitive topics. Here's what some common emojis might mean when used in a certain context:










Sexual References

-  - Bottom, butt
-  - Penis
-  - Arousal or ejaculation
-  - Arousal
-  - Oral sex
-  - Sexting or dirty talk
-  or  - Suggestive content
-  - Sharing explicit content secretly

Drugs & Alcohol

-  - Weed
-  - Drug dealer ("plug")
-  - Pills
-  - Lean or liquid drugs
-  - Drunk or high
-  - Cocaine
-  - Smoking (weed or cigarettes)
-  - Lean (codeine + soda)
-  - Ketamine (horse tranquiliser)
-  - Heroin ("chasing the dragon")
-  - Buzzed or tipsy
-  - Ecstasy or pills disguised as sweets

Mental Health & Self-Harm

-  - Depression, emotional pain
-  - Self-harm
-  - Feeling foggy/numb
-  - Feeling cold/emotionless
-  - Sharp object for self-harm
-  - Body image struggles
-  - Feeling empty
-  - Mental fog or dissociation
-  - "In a dark place"

Where teens hide

Teens often use less obvious apps to keep their digital lives private. Some of these may be harmless, but others can be used to hide risky behaviour, communicate with strangers, or share explicit content without being noticed.

- **Finsta (Fake Instagram):** A secondary account used to post personal, emotional, or risky content meant only for close friends.
- **Burner Accounts:** Temporary or anonymous profiles on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, or Reddit, often used to share things they wouldn't on their main accounts.
- **Vault Apps:** Apps disguised as something innocent (like a calculator or music player) but used to store hidden photos, messages, or videos.
- **Chat Apps with Disappearing Messages:** Snapchat, Discord, and Telegram are popular for their temporary messages or encrypted chats. Teens may use these to avoid message history.

💡 **Tip:** Rather than banning apps, ask your teen what they like about them. Opening up a conversation builds trust and gives you insight into how they use tech.

APPS EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

 TIKTOK <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inappropriate trends• Grooming in comments/DMs• Algorithmic addiction• Adult content	 SNAPCHAT <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sexting• Snap Map• Disappearing messages• Pressure to maintain "streaks"	 ROBLOX <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chat with strangers• Inappropriate games• Scams• In-game purchases
 OMEGLE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Random video chats with strangers• Exposure to nudity• Highly risky for under-16s	 YUBO <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Tinder for teens" style swiping• Live streaming• Unsafe adult interaction	 WINK <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Works with Snapchat• Lets users meet new people• Profile-based swiping
 REDDIT <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unfiltered forums ("subreddits")• Easy access to adult or disturbing content	 DISCORD <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unmoderated chats• Exposure to adult content• High grooming risk• Cyberbullying	 TELEGRAM <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hidden, illegal content• End-to-end encryption• Hard-to-monitor group chats
 KIK <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anonymity• Often used for sexting• Difficult to trace users• Grooming	 INSTAGRAM <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hidden DMs• Body image issues• Exposure to adult content• Teens often create Finstas (fake accounts)	 BE REAL <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourages photo sharing• Screenshots are possible• May increase pressure to always participate

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MOST APPS ARE USED HARMLESSLY. KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

New digital reality

Artificial Intelligence is part of daily teen life – from filters on social media to AI chatbots that act as virtual friends. But not all uses are harmless:

- Deepfakes: These are AI-generated fake videos or images that can be used to bully, blackmail, or shame. Some deepfakes involve inserting a person's face into explicit content.
- AI Companions & Chatbots: Teens may turn to AI bots for emotional support, which can isolate them from real relationships.
- Homework Help or Cheating: AI tools like ChatGPT can be helpful for learning but may be used to cut corners or avoid understanding schoolwork.
- Spreading Misinformation: AI can generate fake health advice, conspiracy theories, or unsafe "life hacks" – especially on platforms like TikTok.

🎓 What you can do: Talk about how to evaluate sources online, how to tell if something is real or fake, and why face-to-face connections matter.



Memes, & dark humour

Today's meme culture is full of irony and coded jokes – but sometimes, these messages reflect emotional pain or mental health struggles. Teens may use dark humour as a shield for real issues they're facing.

Common red-flag memes:

- "rip me" or coffin/grave memes
- "I'm in the void again" – used casually but could signal detachment
- Depression memes shared frequently or late at night
- Posts with sad lyrics, crying emojis, or cryptic captions like "no one gets it"

🧠 What to look for: Frequency, tone, and timing. If dark or self-deprecating humour becomes consistent, check in gently.

🗣️ Start with curiosity, not critique. You might say, "That post made me wonder how you're really feeling. Want to talk about it?"



Privacy & consent

Teens are exploring relationships in a world where sharing is instant and permanent. They may not realise the emotional and legal consequences of sharing intimate content.

Key concerns:

- Sexting under pressure: Many teens agree to send photos or messages because they feel pressured – but consent given under pressure isn't real consent. Feeling like you "have to" or you'll lose someone's approval is a sign of coercion, not choice.
- Revenge sharing or leaks: Images sent in trust may be forwarded or posted publicly.
- Legal risks: Sharing or possessing nude images of anyone under 18, even themselves, is illegal and can have lasting consequences.

🧠 Talk early and often: Let your teen know:

- They have the right to say no – always.
- They should never feel pressured to prove their feelings through photos.
- What's sent online is never truly gone.

♥ Model respect. Conversations about sex and privacy should come from a place of safety, not shame.



Online money risks

The digital world also comes with financial traps. Some teens are drawn to quick money schemes or investing trends without understanding the risk.

Risks to watch for:

- Crypto hype: Teens may be influenced by influencers promising big returns from cryptocurrency or NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens).
- Online gambling disguised as games: Some mobile games allow betting using real or in-game money – often called "skin gambling."
- Scams via DMs: Fake investment accounts or "side hustle" offers can lure teens into giving away personal information or money.
- Selling content or services: Teens may use platforms like CashApp, PayPal, or private messaging to exchange explicit content for money.

💬 Encourage transparency: Talk openly about money, digital advertising, and how to spot scams. Make it okay to ask questions about finances and online offers.



Talking to your teen

If you spot red flags – whether it's unfamiliar slang, suspicious emojis, or changes in behaviour – it's natural to feel concerned. But how you approach the conversation can make all the difference.

1. **Stay calm.** Your teen needs to know you're a safe person to talk to. Reacting with anger or shock may cause them to shut down or hide things in the future.
2. **Choose the right moment.** Look for a calm, private time – like during a car ride, walk, or while cooking together – when they're more likely to open up.
3. **Ask gently and non-judgmentally.** Try: "Hey, I noticed something on your phone. I'm not angry – I just want to understand what's going on."
4. **Validate their feelings.** Even if you don't agree, acknowledging their perspective can build trust. Say things like "That sounds really hard," or "I get why you'd feel that way."
5. **Be honest about your concerns.** Explain that you're worried because you care, not because you want to invade their privacy. Make it about their wellbeing.
6. **Listen more than you speak.** Resist the urge to lecture or solve everything. Sometimes they just need to be heard.
7. **Set clear, compassionate boundaries.** Let them know what's okay and not okay – but always with respect and openness.
8. **Offer support and follow up.** Ask how you can help. Let them know you're there for them now and in the future. Check in regularly without pressure.
9. **Don't go it alone.** If you feel out of your depth, reach out. ARC Counselling is here for both you and your teen – we can support you every step of the way





Get in touch



0118 977 6710



office@arcweb.org.uk



www.arcweb.org.uk

ARC offers one-to-one counselling to Adults and Young People across Wokingham and the surrounding areas. We provide confidential counselling at our main site in Wokingham, Oakwood in Woodley, schools and GP surgeries across the area.

ARC provides an important role within the community, with referrals coming from other agencies as well as self-referrals.

In addition to counselling, we also offer important support for 16 – 25 year olds through our Youth Access program. This program provides information to young people on where and how to access support, from housing, to work and mental health.

Our counselling services are free to young people under the age of 21 years and low cost for adults. We believe that counselling should be accessible for all and that cost should never be a barrier to better mental health.

We are a charity with over 25 years offering support within the Wokingham area.