



## Broadcasting Live from Your Child's Bedroom



Imagine drawing back the curtain to your kitchen window and seeing scores of strangers staring back. What if some were even naked or held up signs that read “take off your shirt”?

As bizarre and creepy as that vision may be, many teens pull back the virtual curtain of their webcams allowing strangers to gawk and deliver sexual and demeaning messages through the window of online video chat. Sometimes these strangers even pose nude. It has law enforcement concerned, and parents need to better understand the world of video chat and set up guidelines for their kids. Specifically, adults should directly supervise the use of webcams and video chat. Unfortunately, many parents are behind the times, and teens are exposing themselves to adult content and unnecessary risk.

### The Basics of Video Chat

What is video chat?

One-on-one video chat is similar to a phone call. Two parties see and talk (or type their communication) to each other online. The computer screen is like a window separating adjoining rooms. Another method is more akin to a personal show than a conversation. For

instance, musicians often use this format to broadcast their thoughts or practice sessions to their fans, who type messages to the artists. The performers can then read the questions or comments and respond verbally. In this second scenario, the person broadcasting can't see the spectators watching. Both friends and strangers can view the online show and can choose to comment or watch silently. This sounds innocent enough, but teens, typically broadcasting from their bedrooms, open their online windows to a barrage of bullying and sexual harassment. Girls on video chat sites regularly receive sexual messages, often asking them to disrobe. There are dozens of video chat sites, some with unique twists, and precautions should be taken for all.

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## Random Pairings through Chat Roulette

Deserving of special precaution, Chatroulette is a one-on-one chat site that automatically connects users with random strangers. No membership or log-in is required. Like spinning a roulette wheel, participants move from one stranger to the next. They see each other through their webcams, and, if interested, they strike up a chat. If not, participants click a button and roll the dice with someone else. Unfortunately, the site has become infamous for nudity and people exposing themselves online to random strangers. New York-based filmmaker Casey Neistat once described the site as "71% boys, 15% girls, and 14% perverts." An investigation by the Cyber Crimes Unit of the Texas Attorney General revealed nearly half of the randomly selected chat participants immediately exposed themselves and conducted sexually explicit acts on camera. The deviant behaviour became such a problem, it prompted the creator of the site, Andrey Ternovskiy, to issue a letter in which he threatened to report cases of indecent exposure to minors to police. Indecent exposure should not be the only concern. Sessions can be recorded, pictures can be taken, all by strangers, without consent.

## Stickam, the Web's No. 1 Video Chat Site

If Chatroulette is the seedy underbelly of video chat, Stickam plays to personalities and teens seeking instant attention. It's the number one video chat site online, boasting 9 million registered users, and it was named "The Top Video Destination for Teens" by Nielsen.

Stickam allows people to set up a webcam and broadcast a live show, which anyone may watch and listen. Musicians often offer live performances, and entertainers use Stickam to engage their audiences. Recently, Stickam added a feature that allows members to link their Stickam profiles to their social networking profiles, such as Facebook and Twitter. Meanwhile, teens create their own shows where they talk about their relationships and interests or simply sit in front of their computers and interact with dozens or even hundreds of viewers who type comments or questions. The people watching may choose to connect via their own webcams, stay out of sight and chime in with text responses, or simply watch the show. Sexual requests and sexual harassment are commonplace, especially when teen girls and women "Go Live" on Stickam. While most of these comments seemed to be ignored, it occasionally makes headlines.

In January 2012, a U K man, was charged with child pornography in connection with using Stickam to persuade a 13-year-old girl to provide a pornographic video of herself. He then

allegedly threatened to post the video unless she provided more footage of herself over a two-year period. Stickam provides a help page on safety, informing users how to ban people from a channel or report abuse, but it is unclear how often teens use these features. In a review of multiple video chats, Covenant Eyes did not notice anyone being kicked out of a chat due to sexual comments.

## **Stickam and Lurkers**

Stickam allows anyone to seek out its members through a search function that includes gender, age, and zip code. For instance, anyone may do a search for 14-year-old female Stickam members living within 5 miles of a specific zip code. In fact, Covenant Eyes did a search for 21- to 35-year-old men and women living within 5 miles of a zip code. All visible profiles were of young teenagers and preteens who were obviously lying about their age. Because even non-members can search and watch, performing teenagers never know who is in their audience. Stickam's own glossary defines these anonymous watchers as "Lurkers": someone who watches a live stream but who does not enter the chat room. Members who want to avoid lurkers may set their player to require viewers to log in in order to watch. For most users, the goal is to get as many viewers as possible. Stickam even keeps a rankings board of those people who get the most views, and for those who want views, lurkers are in.

In a review by Covenant Eyes, every sampled show with at least 50 viewers let in the lurkers. Most would have a few other people on their webcams, along with a few who were logged in to chat, but the bulk of the viewers were lurkers.

To be clear, these "shows" are rarely riveting entertainment. Many are teens who simply talk in front of their computers. Why would scores of people sit anonymously and silently watching a teenager talk? The short answer: there's no way to know, because they're strangers.

## **Stickam Shuffle**

Stickam goes so far as to make a game out of talking to strangers. Stickam Shuffle is cut from the same cloth as Chatroulette. Here members earn points and prizes for talking to as many people as possible or for talking for extended periods of time. Stickam claims to have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to nudity and obscenity, but I doubt the effectiveness of the claim.

## **Skype: A Safer Alternative**

Video chat can be a great way to interact with family members, friends, and business associates, especially when there are miles of separation. Free programs, like [Skype](#), allow people to make what is essentially a video telephone call. After downloading free software, members may call other Skype members who are online and talk face-to-face. Members may also connect Skype to their Facebook profile, which broadens their Skype directory of friends. Skype isn't risk free. People can receive unwanted Skype calls, just like households have experienced for decades with the telephone. However, answering a Skype call from a stranger can expose one to inappropriate conduct visually. And like e-mail, people should practice caution when receiving attachments through Skype, especially those sent by strangers. Attachments can contain inappropriate content, viruses, or other malware. Meanwhile, modesty is not a prerequisite to using Skype, so adult supervision should be provided to teens and children.

## Making the Safe Choice

Parents should block Chatroulette, as the dangers outweigh any benefit to kids. Adults should also avoid it for the same reason. Stickam and similar video chat sites should only be used with adult supervision. While many channels on Stickam are innocent enough to watch, hosting an online show should be restricted where only friends and family may join. Stickam allows hosts to restrict their video chats to just their friends or contacts, including those on Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Like other Internet interactions, Accountability software like Covenant Eyes can help parents know when teens are stepping outside of boundaries. Knowing how a child or teen uses the Internet encourages productive and healthy conversations and can alert a parent when inappropriate websites are accessed. Webcams should be unplugged when not in use, if that is an option. Closing a laptop or covering up a camera with a piece of tape can also block unwanted intrusion by a hacker. Parents should restrict the use of webcams in bedrooms or bathrooms. Buy webcams that have an indicator light that comes on when it is in use. If it comes on unexpectedly, it may indicate a hacker. Whether online or offline, always preach (and practice) that age-old advice: Don't talk to strangers.