DIGITAL DRIVER'S ED

TIKTOK

SCREEN SANITY™

TIKTOK

WHAT IS IT?

TikTok (formerly Musical.ly) is an app that lets users share 15 second videos. Teens and tweens upload lip-syncs, challenges, dances, comedies, skits, and potentially cringe-worthy content, making it easy to fall down a rabbit hole of binge-watching.

THE BASICS

MUSERS Teens and tweens—often 8 or 9 years old—whose livestreams reportedly "go live" once the muser has reached 1k fans. Many youth see TikTok as a springboard to a career as a YouTube influencer—promising riches and fame.

EMOJIS Can be **purchased** in the Wallet section to show affection for a favorite muse during a livestream. Some emojis include "love bang," "Italian hand," and "panda."

MEME CULTURE is huge on TikTok, leading to lots of shareable **"challenges."**

PARENTAL CONTROLS Nope. Dangers? Yes. Easy access to mature content, online predators, and cyberbullying.

52

average number of minutes users spend on TikTok daily

GOOD TO KNOW

Private vs. Public

Growing your fanbase is much easier to do when your account is public than when it is private. And a public account comes with a lot of dangers, especially for children.

Legal Requirements

Though the legal requirement is 13, Common Sense Media recommends users be 16 years old to download.

DIGITALDRIVERSED

RIDE. PRACTICE. DRIVE.

One of our Screen Sanity Rules of Thumb is "Ride. Practice. Drive." Before you hand your child the keys to a car, they spend many years shadowing you in the backseat, followed by a learner's permit—with you logging hours by their side, coaching them with ongoing support and assistance.

When it comes to TikTok, conversations are the most powerful training tool you have.

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1 RIDE.

ARE THEY PREPPED AND READY FOR TIKTOK?

BEFORE YOU SAY YES TO TIKTOK...

Make sure you've covered these topics with your child:

- [ ] Screen Sanity Rules of Thumb
- [ ] **Pornography**
- [ ] **Sexting**
- [ ] **Online safety + privacy**
- [ ] **Cyberbullying**
- [ ] **Comparison + Self Image**
- [ ] **Digital footprints are permanent**

TEST DRIVE IT YOURSELF

Before you say yes, download the app yourself to get familiar with it. Try creating your own TikTok video to learn more about what your child will experience.

LEARN WHY YOUR CHILD WANTS TIKTOK...

Why do you want to use TikTok? What do you plan to do on the app?

How do your friends use TikTok?

What are ways you can use the app creatively?

Do you think the app will help you have better community? Why or why not?

Do you know what the dangers of using TikTok are?

How are you going to protect yourself while using the app?

How are you going to keep yourself accountable for how you use it?

Do you think it's worth continuing to use TikTok if you accidentally run across graphic content? Why or why not?

Why do you think people are willing to spend a good chunk of money sending emojis to strangers? Would you do this yourself?

2 PRACTICE.

MENTOR YOUR CHILD DURING A LEARNER'S PERMIT SEASON

START WITH STRONG LIMITS, AND RELEASE THEM SLOWLY.

- Create device-free zones —like mealtimes + bedrooms overnight.
- Make it non-negotiable that password is shared with parent. **In TikTok, the password is automatically reset every 30 days.**
- Install a monitoring app like Qustodio, OurPact, or **Bark** as a limited safety net.
- Only allow a small number of friends and family at first.
- The default privacy setting is public. **Toggle it to private.**
- Toggle off "in-app purchases" in the Restrictions section.
- Try co-creating a story or video with your child, showing them how to block unwanted solicitations, reject messages from strangers, and report inappropriate content immediately.
- Use features available through the Digital Wellbeing tab in settings.
- In the beginning, discuss (and approve) all initial posts.

RIDE IN THE PASSENGER SEAT

If you are ready to let your child try TikTok, **plan to log some hours in the passenger seat, coaching them through the thrills and hazards of their new app.** You'll also want to occasionally log in to their account to get a sense of what they're posting.

TOPICS TO CHECK IN ON

What has stood out to you about TikTok since you started using it?

Do you think most people on the app are using it creatively and for good purposes?

What do you think motivates other people to use TikTok?

Have you run across any mature/explicit content?

Do you think that TikTok brings you deep connection or loneliness?

How do you think TikTok is affecting you, both positively and negatively?

How can I help you better manage the negative effects?

What would have to happen for you to decide not to be on the app? Will you tell me right away if that scenario occurs?

What do you think about how hard others are trying to gain followers and views?

For you, would you say TikTok is "time well spent"?

ACCIDENTS ARE BOUND TO HAPPEN

Don't freak out when your teen encounters roadblocks or emergencies. Let them know you are safe harbor; they can tell you anything.

3 DRIVE.

TRUST THEM TO MERGE CAUTIOUSLY + OFFER ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE

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HOW DOES IT WORK?

TikTok's **main features** (which will all be discussed more below) are:

- **Video Creation:** Create, edit, and post videos.
- **Effects:** Apply filters and other Snapchat-like effects to videos.
- **Messaging:** Have text-message-style conversations with others.
- **Video Viewing:** Watch others' videos, and like, comment on, or share them.
- **Profile Viewing:** Like Instagram, users can view others' profiles, which consist of a profile pic, following/follower stats, and a feed of their posts.
- **Livestreaming:** Streaming video in real-time.

A lot of teens use TikTok to post videos of themselves lip-syncing and/or dancing to their favorite songs (that's how Baby Ariel got started). Some sing or play instruments along with another song. Some create comedic skits, while others make DIY (do-it-yourself) videos with music as a background track. Many make videos and duets to participate in a trend or meme. Check out **this list** of all the things found on TikTok.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DOWNLOAD TIKTOK?

When we downloaded the app, it opened with a screen to either accept or decline their Terms of Service. Once we accepted, it immediately opened with the Home feed of videos from real users, over which were tips for how to use the interface. We did not have to create an account or profile to begin viewing videos. However, in order to follow others or create our own videos, it prompted us to sign up using a phone number, email address, or a Facebook/Google/Twitter/Instagram account

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I CREATE AN ACCOUNT?

After choosing how you want to sign up, it will ask for your birthday (which isn't ever shown to others), then ask you to create a password, after which it verifies that you're not a bot. It will also prompt you to find Facebook friends who are on TikTok, though you can skip this option.

Once your account is created, you can now follow other accounts, have direct message conversations with other users, customize your profile, and post videos.

Be aware that upon first signing up, an account is public by default. We got a handful of new followers just from posting one video with no hashtags. Also note that, once made public, you cannot delete videos from TikTok's servers. If you publish videos as public and then make your account private, those videos **won't be deleted** if you uninstall the app.

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HOW DO I CREATE A VIDEO?

Tap on the plus sign in the middle of the bottom of the screen to create a video (you'll have to enable access to the microphone and to the camera to do so). You can choose music for the video right off the bat by tapping "Pick a sound" at the top middle of the screen, which will bring up the music library sorted by themes. There's also the option to shoot a video first and add music afterward.

Options when posting (mainly located on right side of screen):

- Toggle between the front-facing camera and the back camera.
- Choose different recording speeds.
- "Beauty," which removes wrinkles, shininess, redness, freckles, etc.
- Instagram-esque filters.
- Record hands free.
- Tapping this yields 2 more options:
- Toggle between 15-second or 60-second videos.
- Turn the flash on or off.
- Snapchat-esque effects (this graphic changes periodically).
- Upload a video from the camera roll **(which can be longer than 60 seconds).**

To record, one simply holds their thumb on the button. By releasing, it will stop shooting and allow you to edit that "segment," then continue shooting more segments or post it. One can post a video publicly or privately, as well as share to other social media platforms that have already been connected to TikTok or choose to save it as a Draft.

Check out the **"Using TikTok"** category on their website for more detailed descriptions of all of its features.

WHAT'S IN THE HOME FEED?

As mentioned above, the Home feed is the default tab that appears any time you open the app. It's located in the bottom left corner and shows videos posted by the accounts you're following ("Following"), as well as videos based on what you have previously liked ("For You"). This screen is a good place to see the accounts/videos your child views when they use the app.

HOW DO I SEARCH FOR SPECIFIC ACCOUNTS OR VIDEOS?

Immediately to the right of the Home feed is the Search or Discover tab. By tapping on that, you'll see a new screen that has a search bar across the top, under which is an automatically scrolling carousel of featured or trending accounts and hashtags. Beneath that, it lists trending hashtags with accompanying videos under each one. These hashtags update frequently and encourage musers to post videos that have a particular theme, such as #WitnessMyFitness or #BeatToTheBeat. There are more than 5 million #InMyFeelings challenge videos on TikTok compared to 1.7 million on Instagram. When searching, you can search Users, Sounds, or Hashtags. Simply by selecting one of these categories, the app will populate with what's trending in that category before you ever type anything.

WHERE ARE DIRECT MESSAGES?

You can access TikTok's direct message system via the tab second from the right that looks like a chat bubble. This is where you access notifications and Direct Messages. After tapping on the tab, you'll see an icon that looks like an inbox in the top right corner. That's where musers can speak privately with each other. If you send a direct message to someone else, the app will tell you that there is a possibility they will not receive the message because of their privacy preferences. If your account is public, you can receive messages from anyone, which is obviously dangerous.

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WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT PROFILES?

You can access your profile at the bottom right corner of the app, and there are many options for customizing a profile. You can add a picture, a video, a bio, and links to your Instagram and YouTube pages. You can also share your profile on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and access your QR code to make it easier for others to find your profile.

In others' profiles, you can see every video they have posted, as well as who they're following, who their "fans" are, and how many hearts they have gotten.

WHAT'S A DUET?

This feature allows musers to collaborate on a video, though it's different than it was on Musical.ly. Before, users had to follow each other and neither could have a private account in order to do a duet. Now, all users have to do is tap the share button on any video, then tap on Duet. This will bring up a screen with the original video on one side, and a space for the second user to create their corresponding video. Whatever music is in the first video is the music that will be on the duet. If users want to plan a duet ahead of time, they'll use the Direct Messages to make the plan.

CAN SOMEONE LIVESTREAM ON TIKTOK?

Yes and no. When we first signed up, we had 2 notifications about accounts that were currently livestreaming—that is, musers who were streaming videos in real time for other musers to watch, like, comment on, and send emojis in real time. But the feature seemed nonexistent within the interface, so after some digging, we discovered that the official story is that the feature only becomes available once a muser **has reached 1k fans.** However, viewing comments on YouTube tutorials for how to go live on TikTok reveals that the feature seems to randomly show up on different accounts. Some reported having the ability to go live despite having very few fans, while others with many fans complained that the feature did not appear for them. It remains to be seen if the company will make this more widely available or tighten down on restrictions.

Whether or not an account has the ability to livestream, it always has the ability to view others' livestreams. When watching a livestream, you not only view the video, but you also see emojis and comments appear on the screen as they're sent. Musers livestream for various purposes. Many musers use their time to feature their fans on the stream in exchange for the "love" they show, i.e., follows, hearts, and emojis.

We saw one muser showing off his drumming skills and another was doing a Q&A session. One account was livestreaming a photoshoot in a mansion. Several seemed to be active vloggers (video bloggers), and they were using TikTok to promote their Instagram and YouTube channels.

Several characteristics that stood out to us about TikTok's livestreams were:

1. We had instant access to anyone, anywhere in the world. We saw multiple livestreams in foreign languages, such as German or Spanish.

2. People seemed more than willing to spend money to send emojis to their favorite musers.

3. It was easy to run across inappropriate content.

4. Many musers (mainly those that the livestreamers were thanking and featuring in their feeds) looked like they were eight or nine years old, though it seems like this is less of a problem on TikTok than it was on Live.ly, Musical.ly's livestreaming app (perhaps because there isn't one place to go to just scroll through livestreams).

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WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE EMOJIS?

You're probably familiar with sending emojis in a text message or email, but some emojis in a TikTok livestream work a little differently: They cost money. These emojis include "love bang," "Italian hand," and "panda." You can pay for them by going to TikTok's settings and tapping on Wallet (which is also accessible via the emojis screen at the bottom of a livestream). From the Wallet, you can purchase coins, which range in price from $0.99 for 100 coins to $99.99 for 10,000. The emojis themselves vary in price, with the most expensive ones currently being "I'm very rich" (1,000 coins or $10) and "drama queen" (5,000 coins or $50).

In one livestream, a fan who gave an "I'm very rich" emoji was given two bonus entries in a raffle in exchange. In other cases, musers who were livestreaming would at least call out and thank the followers who gave generously.

ARE THERE PARENTAL CONTROLS?

No. As long as a user has access to their account, they can make their account public, turn off Restricted Mode, use the app as long they want, direct message anyone, and view any videos. However, because the app doesn't make you log in every time you open the app, it's possible for a parent to pick the Digital Wellbeing passcode (which is required to be reset every 30 days) and the account password, then not tell the child what it is. That does mean that a parent would have to enter the password for the child any time the app asks for it, but because users are required to enter the current password in order to reset the password, it would limit some functionality.

A caveat, though: If a child gets annoyed by this and hasn't really built up their account, they can easily just log out of the account and create a new one without the parents knowing. This is why it's important to not simply put strict boundaries on a phone without talking about them first.

WHY DO KIDS LOVE TIKTOK?

One reason why teens and preteens like TikTok is the chance to get famous or, at the very least, to get other people's attention. It's also worth mentioning that musers do get money when fans give them emojis, and some users **were reportedly earning $25,000 per month** through brand partnerships and gifts (emojis). So some teens might be enticed by being able to turn making fun videos into a job, rather than having to go to college and/or get a "real" job someday.

Predictably, part of the allure of TikTok is peer pressure. A lot of kids want to be on the app because their friends are on it and because they want to watch popular TikTok personalities. They don't want to be the only one who doesn't know what everyone's talking about.

Also, teenagers nowadays seem to enjoy watching people do activities online. An example of this would be YouTube star PewDiePie, who gained a massive following by posting videos of himself playing video games (which is also a type of video now found on TikTok).

The best way to find out why your kids use (or want to use) TikTok is to simply ask them. That will help you to best understand the underlying drives and needs it's fulfills for them, as well as how to plan conversations about the app.

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WHAT ARE ITS DANGERS?

The primary dangers involved with TikTok have to do with how easy it is to view mature content, how easy it can be to connect with online predators, and the potential for cyberbullying.

We don't want to be fearmongers, but we do think it's important to mention some of the harm people have experienced through Musical.ly and now TikTok. **One dad in Idaho Falls** caught his 11-year-old daughter sending pictures of herself in her underwear to men who had been asking her for inappropriate videos. Another 11-year-old girl **received rape threats** and other sexually graphic messages. In her case, her account was private, and she got those messages after accepting a request from a stranger who she thought was someone she knew. **This mom** recounts some of the gut-wrenching things she saw on the app and even goes as far as to say that porn is not the worst thing on it. Perhaps saddest of all is the story of a **10-year-girl in Aurora, CO** who committed suicide after someone recorded a fight she was in at school and posted it on Musical.ly.

These are horror stories that describe some worst-case scenarios that have happened to children using the app. But what was our experience with TikTok? The majority of the videos we saw could be described as "fluff." Most weren't offensive, nor were they particularly clever. They were of kids lip syncing to songs or acting out scenes and trying to be funny. Something that seems clear is that many of the people using TikTok want attention and validation.

So while TikTok won't allow certain searches, such as for "sex" or "porn," one of the first accounts that was recommended to us as soon as we signed up was highly inappropriate.

We also saw a girl who was livestreaming and swearing at her users. This consisted of her using the f-word every few comments, as did some of the people commenting in the chat. Other comments to her were "she is bi" and "do u like both genders," to which she responded derisively, "There's more than one gender."

When simply scrolling through videos in the "For You" feed, many videos came up mentioning "No Nut November" (NNN). We had a suspicion we knew what this meant, but to be sure, we looked up the hashtag (which had 52.3m occurrences), as well as **the Urban Dictionary definition** (read at your own risk!), which spiked in popularity immensely in 2018. Suffice it to say that it's a spin on the "No Shave November" challenge in which men try not to ejaculate for the whole month in order to boost testosterone and, for some, **potentially increase their clairvoyance** (again, read at your own risk!). However, most of the musers posted a video about it simply because it was trending and might be funny to show their newly acquired"superpowers." The takeaway here is that, though NNN will fade in popularity (at least until next year), other trends will happen, and it's impossible to screen them all or keep young social media users from seeing them (the hashtag isn't unique to TikTok), making regular conversations about TikTok even more necessary.

It's impossible to mention all the things that might be considered dangerous. But know that the majority of the content we saw was not graphic. We encountered plenty of videos that were innocuous, many that were boring, and several that showed some talent. But the graphic content we did stumble on (not to mention all of the songs that are available with explicit lyrics) was pretty easy to find.

Due to mature content, we recommend that parents don't allow children under age 13 to use the app, and it might even be better to wait until they're older (CommonSense Media recommends 16 years old).

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WHAT'S TIKTOK'S POSITION ON MATURE CONTENT?

Among other things, TikTok's **Community Guidelines** prohibit obscene, pornographic, and abusive content. But similar to platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, TikTok relies on its users to regulate and report any inappropriate content they find, meaning there is always some out there.

To be fair to the app's creators, **TikTok states** that it is not intended for kids under the of age 13 and strongly encourages parents to be proactive about their children's use of the app: "More generally, we encourage you to take an active role in your teenager's online experience overall. Start the conversation early about internet safety, online privacy, and the options available to them. Your guidance can be invaluable!" The site also lists several resources to help parents encourage their teens to use the app wisely.

While it's sad and shocking to see so many young children on TikTok, parents do bear the burden of responsibility for allowing their kids to be on the app. But at the same time, it's hard not to wonder why the app's creators aren't more vigilant about enforcing their own rules.

WHERE DID TIKTOK COME FROM?

To fully understand TikTok and its appeal, we need to go back to its origins: Musical.ly.

Musical.ly was a mobile app for making 15-second lip-syncing videos that launched in the U.S. in 2014 and quickly grew in popularity to **200 million registered users.** It even partnered with NBC for the 2018 Winter Olympics to give its users special behind-the-scenes footage. Within the first weekend of the Olympics, **Musical.ly had produced over 10 million engagements.** It was reminiscent of the now-defunct Vine (which is trying to make **something of a comeback)**, a social media platform where users could share six-second-long videos (which could be amusing and clever and led to fame for a number of Viners, one notable example being **pop star Shawn Mendes**). Because of this, Musical.ly filled a hole for many Viners, as well as offered some new features.

According to The Wall Street Journal (paywall), "Musical.ly's great innovation was making the video selfie a thing." Musical.ly videos could be up to 15 seconds long, and users (called "musers," a name that so far seems to have stuck) were able to add music to them, choosing from numerous songs in the app's database or from their own libraries. It was easy for musers to creatively edit the videos by adding various effects. They could then share their creations either publicly or privately.

Musical.ly gave rise to a quite a few teen stars in its own right. **Famous musers include** Baby Ariel, Jacob Sartorius (currently **dating Stranger Things star Millie Bobby Brown**), and twins **Lena and Lisa Mantler.** But all of that ended when ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of TikTok (aka "Douyin" in China) that **purchased Musical.ly** in November 2017, decided to absorb Musical.ly into TikTok on August 2, 2018. The Musical.ly app was no more, and users' accounts were migrated over to the highly similar TikTok app.

Now that it's been combined with Musical.ly's existing user base, ByteDance claims it has 500 million uses in 150 countries. Many wondered if the merge would turn off Musical.ly lovers, but the data seems to show the opposite. In the iOS app store, it maintains a 4.7 out of 5 stars rating, with over 600k ratings. The app's October 2018 installs in the U.S. increased 237% over the previous year's, surpassing the installs of YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram.

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It's worth mentioning, though, that **TikTok's engagement rate** (meaning users who open the app every day) is at 29%, while the engagement rates for the other aforementioned social media apps is in the 95% range. And a quick scroll through some of the recent reviews of the app reveals many who wish it was still Musical.ly.

TikTok's requirements limit use of the app to anyone 13 and older, though there's **plenty of evidence** that many Musical.ly users were quite young (9 years old or even younger; see image), so it's probably true that TikTok has similar demographics. And while there's plenty of anecdotal evidence to support claims that its **main user base is 13- to 18-years-old,** specific statistics are hard to find.

HOW IS TIKTOK DIFFERENT FROM MUSICAL.LY?

Beyond its name, a font change, a couple other interface changes, and any changes mentioned previously, **the differences are marginal.** Users were promised better access to content from other countries, since TikTok had more of a global audience than Musical.ly did. They were also promised more little features, like better filters and effects.

One of the biggest changes is called Digital Wellbeing which is accessed via Settings. It offers a Restricted Mode (which limits the appearance of videos that may not be appropriate for all audiences) and Screen Time Management (no more than 2 hours on the app per day, though this is easily overcome by simply entering one's passcode).

ONE LAST THING...

We found **this suggestion** given by mom Anastasia Basil (the one who thinks porn isn't the worst thing on the app) an interesting idea worth considering: We parents tell our children that if they stay off all social media—yes, ALL social media; so no Snapchat, Kik, Tinder, Instagram, TikTok, Amino, Yubo, and so on—until they're 16, they will each get a check for $1,600 to spend however they want. Crazy, but also fascinating. We reward our kids for so many other achievements, so why not, as Basil says, reward them for "winning at peer pressure"? Or, at the very least, let that idea inspire us to come up with more creative ways of helping our kids have healthy relationships with their phones and social media, rather than simply being the "evil" parents who always say no to the things that seem so important to them.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

It's helpful to remember that TikTok is a product of two good desires: to create and to be in community—and it actually is pretty fun to make TikTok videos.

Besides the adult content on the app, the main complication is that there's a huge pull toward wanting to get attention in the form of fans, comments, and likes. Growing your fanbase is much easier to do when your account is public than when it is private. And a public account comes with a lot of dangers, especially for children. As Basil puts it:

If your child does not maintain an online self, chances are her social circle is small—friends from school, neighbors, family. If she has a rough day at school, a bell sets her free each afternoon. The jerks who taunted her at lunch aren't coming home with her for the night. She has space to think, to be with you, to read, to hug her dog, to recover, to get brave. Online, there is no school bell, there is no escape; she exists globally, and so do her mistakes. The ridicule is permanent.

If you decide to let your kids use TikTok, have consistent conversations with them about it. Make sure they're educated on the dangers of connecting with strangers online and that they have accountability.

This parent guide is liscensed and distributed with permission by Axis. For more in-depth, faith-based parenting resources on this topic, visit **Axis.org.**

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Smartphone Sanity
by David Eaton, Jeremiah Callihan
and the Axis Team with Sarah Miles

For Parents
TikTok

Creator Playbook
Musical.ly *(but much still applies)*

A Guide to TikTok for Anyone Who Isn't a Teen
Slate

TikTok/Musical.ly Guide
Stay Hipp

Parents' Ultimate Guide to TikTok
Common Sense Media

How to Record a Music Video with TikTok
WikiHow *(with screenshots)*

90 Million Tweens, a Free App, One Goal: Fame
Elle *(written in 2016 about Musical.ly, but many of the points still apply)*

Brands are using influencers on Musical.ly to reach teens
Digiday

Infographic - Social Media Trends That Will Take Over 2018
Filmora

Aurora man accused of producing child porn using Musical.ly app pleads not guilty
Chicago Tribune

Dad warns of popular app after discovering disturbing messages sent to 7-year-old
WGN TV

Ten-year-old schoolgirls traumatised after vile paedophile 'hijacked their group gathering on popular Musical.ly video app
Daily Mail

The Facts about Online Predators Every Parent Should Know
CommonSense Media

Musical.ly: A parents' guide to the ultra-addictive lip-syncing app
USA Today *(currently does not have any updated articles on TikTok)*

Is the TikTok (formerly Musical.ly) App Safe? A Complete App Profile for Parents
Protect Young Eyes

What Families Need To Know About TikTok
Family Online Safety Institute

TikTok, a Chinese Video App, Brings Fun Back to Social Media
New York Times

The brands finally understand TikTok
Vox

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