What is Instagram?

Instagram is a photo-based social network launched in 2010 and bought by Facebook in 2012. With around 700 million users worldwide, it is a popular alternative for Facebook amongst children and young people, and is especially popular amongst older primary age children, even though it is not designed to be used children this young. Many teenagers use it instead of Facebook because it's not a platform that their families use, so there is usually less online moderation from parents.
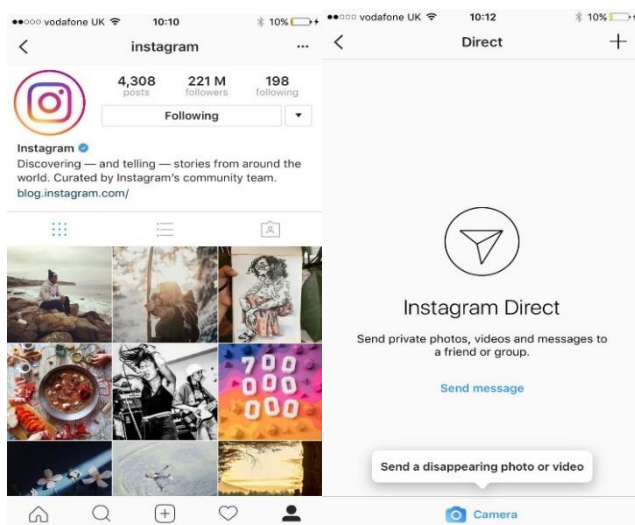
Instagram allows you to create a profile and share pictures with friends (known as Followers). Your followers can then 'like' or comment on your photos. Your profile can include a Bio section to describe yourself and include links to other sites or apps. All the shared pictures are accessible to other users who visit the profile.

There are a number of other features, including the ability to 'direct message' Followers (called Instagram Direct), share short videos and send pictures that will only be available to view for a short amount of time – similar to Snapchat. Only users who follow you can send you direct messages.

When pictures are shared you can include a caption and hashtags to make it easier for other users to find when searching or to get involved in online campaigns such as #nomakeupselfie for charities.

Do age restrictions apply?

Yes, they do. Due to personal information laws in the US, Instagram requires users to be over the age of 13 to create an account. However, as Instagram does not ask users their date of birth when they sign up, many assume that there is no age limit. There is also no way of verifying a child's age for accounts.

Are there any privacy settings?

Yes. Instagram gives you control over who can see the photos you post. They can be public, so everyone can see, or you can set your account to 'private' so only your Followers can see. Not everything is hidden by a private account though, as your profile picture and bio (the little bit about yourself) cannot be hidden. They will always be public.

Setting your account to 'Private' is easy to do. Go to your profile, click on the gear symbol at the top and scroll down to the 'Private Account' option. When you switch to a Private Account, it won't change anything for existing Followers but anyone who wants to see your pictures will need to send a 'Follow request'.

As there is the potential for users to write offensive remarks, Instagram give you the ability to hide inappropriate comments. Go to the 'Comment' section of your account options and turn on the 'keyword filter'. This will block phrases and words commonly reported as being offensive, as well as giving you the option to add your own.
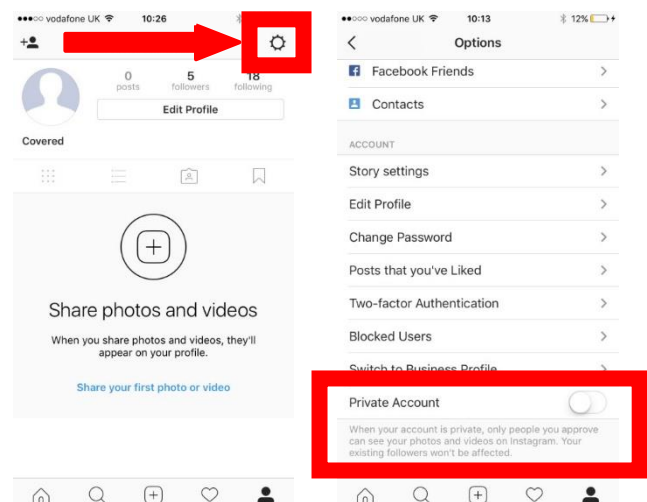
Things to think about:

Followers

Many children and young people feel that they need to have more people following their accounts than their friends, which can lead to a large number of strangers being able to see the pictures they post. It's important to encourage the use of a Private Account, as well as discussing who they should allow access to their personal pictures.

Teach them to block other users who are asking for, or sending, inappropriate messages or pictures, and anyone who is being abusive. Don't forget to report them to Instagram, as they might be doing the same thing to other users. To block and report, click on the icon on the top right, then select what you want to do.

Personal Information

As Instagram allows users to share their pictures with 700 Million other users, it's important to discuss what is and isn't appropriate to share. Are they happy for a huge number of other people to see, potentially save and use the pictures that they post?

Choose an appropriate profile picture that does not show what they look like. Many users choose something that relates to them to make it easier for their real friends to identify them. Use a picture of a pet, a favourite cartoon character or even a picture of their favourite food! If they do choose to use a picture that includes their face, make sure they obscure their features by using some of the 'filters' included in other popular apps.

Any picture posted onto Instagram could be copied by taking a screenshot and pictures can also be 'saved' on the Instagram app to be viewed again without going back to the profile and finding it. Keep the 'bio' short, making sure not to include links to other accounts like Musical.ly or Facebook, and never include personal information such as age, phone number, address or usernames for other social apps.
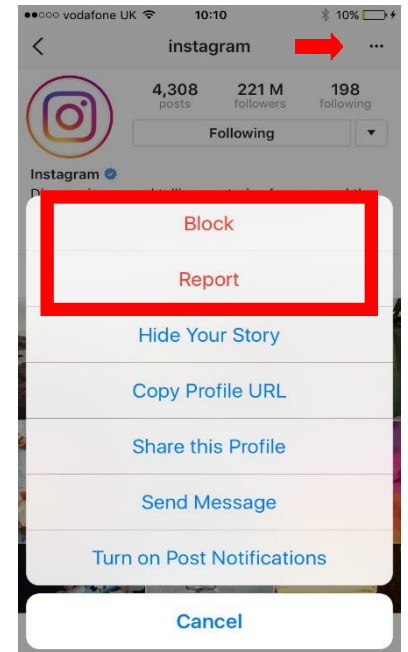
Celebrity Accounts

A huge number of celebrities use Instagram as a way of engaging with their fans and to promote their 'brands'. While many celebrities use Instagram to promote positive causes, many also use the app to promote products and services on behalf of third party companies for additional income. Celebrity users do not always make it clear that they have been paid to promote, even though they are required to by advertising standards in the UK and US. Find out who they follow and make yourself aware who their online influences are, and discuss that people are not always honest about things when they share them online.

There has also been a rise in the number of offenses involving children by individuals using fake accounts of popular figures to groom children and young people. These users pose as celebrities, such as Justin Bieber and Harry Styles, pretending to be using their 'real' Instagram account. Instagram offers a verification service that enables celebrities to prove it is their real account. Verified users will have a blue tick next to their username to prove it is an official account. If it doesn't have a tick, it's probably not going to be them - no matter what they say to the contrary.

Want to learn more?

Instagram Help: https://help.instagram.com

Simplified Terms and Conditions for Instagram: http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/growing-digital

If you have concerns about the immediate safety of a child, you can call the Police on 101 or, in an emergency, 999