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Safe on Social Guide to  
**Musical.ly**



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# Your Guide to being Safe on Social Media

**musical.ly**

live with passion, live musical.ly



## What is Musical.ly?

The app sensation of 2014, Musical.ly is the brainchild of a Shanghai based social media network that reports user numbers in the range of 80-130 million.

The exact figures are hard to pin down, but the app is wildly popular with a younger demographic, in particular pre-teens and teens. It is a free app available for both Apple and android users.

On its release in 2014, it soared to the top of the app charts and had not been out of the top 30 rated apps until this year where it fell to #89.

It has been valued at \$500 million, sees over 40 million daily users, with around 12 million clips being uploaded on a daily basis. Of its user base, over 50 million are under 21 years of age. And of these over 70% are females.

What singles this app out from the social media pack, is that its content is music based, with its central premise being kids making and editing 15 - second videos of themselves lip-syncing and dancing to popular tunes.

Users refer to themselves as 'musers'.

Musical.ly is used by some enormously popular celebrities such as Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez, which allows the 'musers' to keep up-to-date of their celebrity crushes and feel a direct contact with them.

Livel.ly – affiliated with the musical.ly app , Livel.ly is a live-streaming feature, added in May 2106. Currently it has had an uptake of over 4.3 million users. It allows a "muser" to communicate with their fans in real time, allowing them to hashtag a variety of categories including make-up, singing etc. in their video stream.

It's currently a separate download but the apps are linked and planned to be integrated shortly.

While the app can be applauded for providing a space for its users to share creatively, its users are heavily weighted to the younger end of the scale, which makes being informed about the app and its features important.

## How it works

In summary, it's online karaoke. Parts of popular songs are selected. The user then records themselves singing, lip-syncing or dancing to the song. Once recording is completed, special effects and filters can be added, giving an original take to the clip with the resulting product shared both on the app, and on other social media sites. The clip, once uploaded on Musical.ly becomes a "Musical".

The site actively encourages it's users to grow their fan-base, or to get more "likes". Users are encouraged to post on Instagram, Facebook etc. by saving their video on the camera roll and sharing with other online communities. In fact, by signing up to an account, the "muser" is providing permission for the app to share their content on other social media sites, whether they are aware or not.

"Musers" can like posts, comment, ask questions and invite others to participate in the duet feature. The app regularly runs "hashtag" challenges, requesting a task be performed within the uploaded clip. Having a featured video is the be-all and end-all for most of the users on the sites. A featured video can garner more fans and more likes, increasing a user's fan base. This is a popularity driven app.

The app is public by default. Once a video is posted, it's available for all users to see, and follow. Anyone can look, anyone can follow. Making the account private, means only approved followers can view the content, this can be a problem for validation obsess teens and to their parents wishing to limit their child's exposure online. Videos are featured according to the level of popularity they attract.

## How to navigate the app

### *Setting up an account*

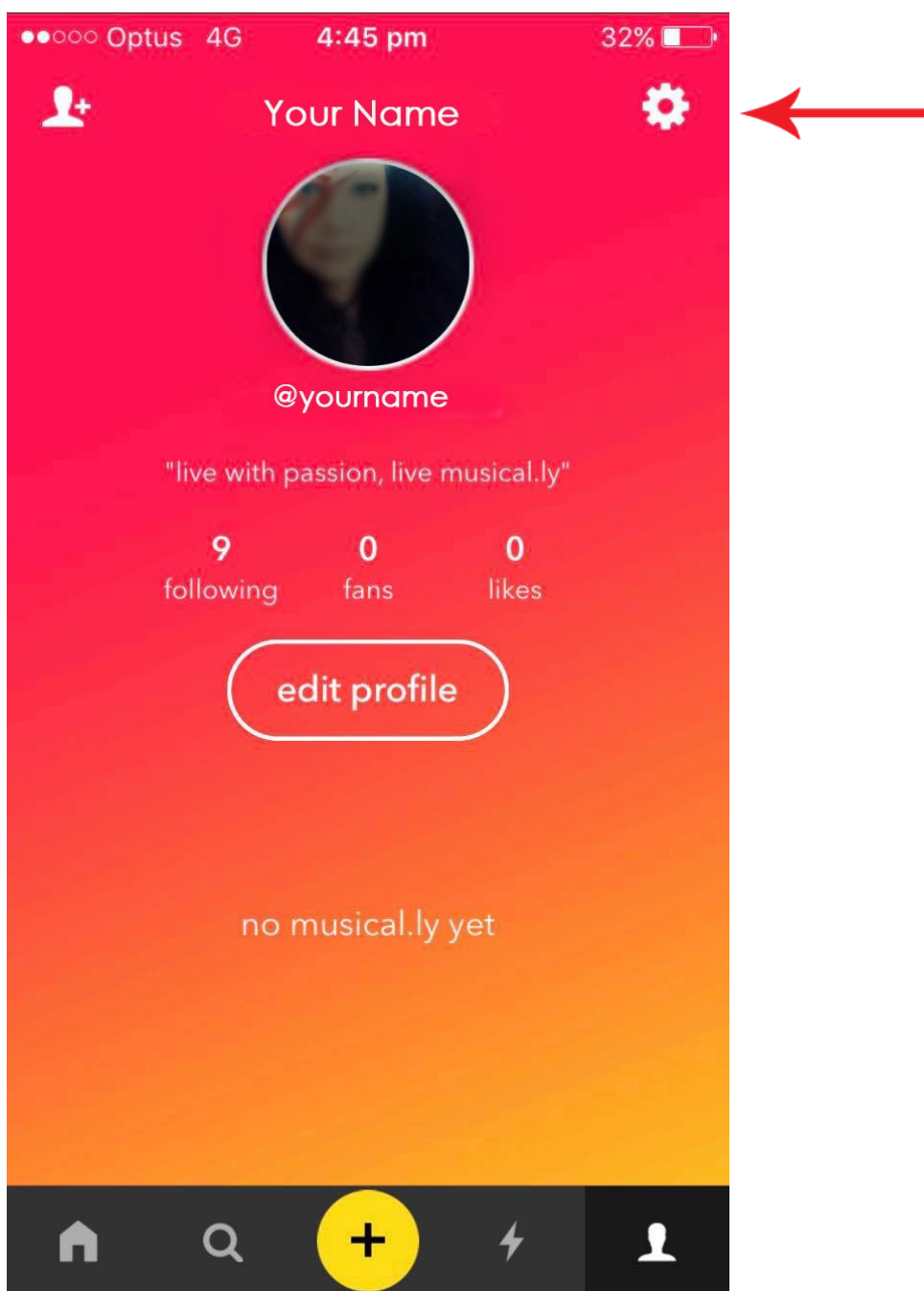
There are three current methods you may use to set up a Musical.ly account, once the app is downloaded.

1. Tap on the sign up selection and select the 'Phone number' option. Enter your correct phone number, and you will receive a confirmation code. Enter the code, and continue on to create a user name and password.
2. Tap on the sign up selection and choose the "email address" option. Enter your correct email address, user name and password.
3. Tap on the sign up selection and select Facebook. Then continue to sign up using your Facebook account details.

Now your account is ready to go.

*NB: - When designing your profile there is the option to add information about the users other social media accounts, in the bio section. If this information is provided, it will remain public regardless of the privacy settings that may be set. To limit the ability of others contacting you via alternate channels, don't provide this information. Clicking on any other social media icons available on the screen can also directly link to another social media account.*

It is also useful to remember not to include any personal details that could be used to identify or locate you on your profile page.



Once you have an account, take note of the wheel in the top right hand corner. This is how you will be able to manage your privacy and location information. You can add friends by using the button on the top left.

Before you continue any further, there are two more things to do.

## Manage your privacy settings

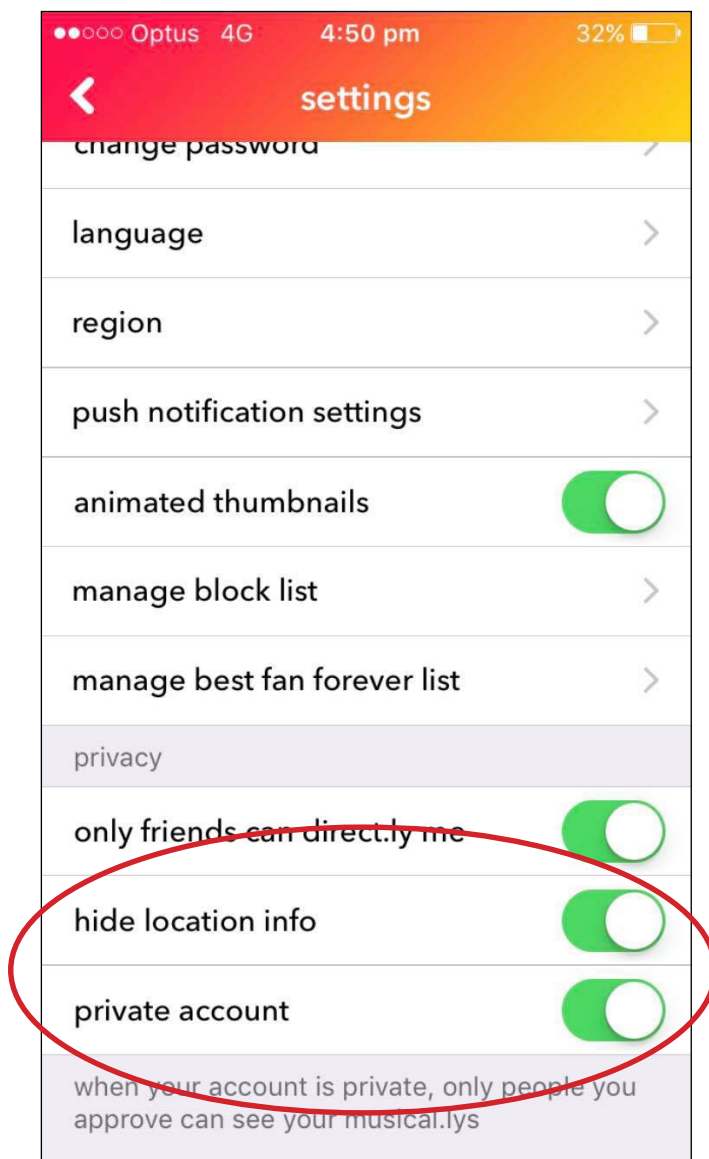
As said previously, the app is by default a public one. To control and limit a user's followers, it is recommended the privacy settings be switched on. Musical.ly is hugely driven by popularity based content, so this is a difficult choice for a teen wanting kudos for their creativity, but it is highly recommended. With a private account, every follower must be approved and only their followers can see their music videos. There is no option to make some items public, and some private.

### Switch off your location information

The My City function on Musical.ly provides users with information about others active nearby. While it doesn't necessarily hand out your name and address, it shows activity within a 50 km radius. It is safest to disable this function, which does not affect the majority of the apps features.

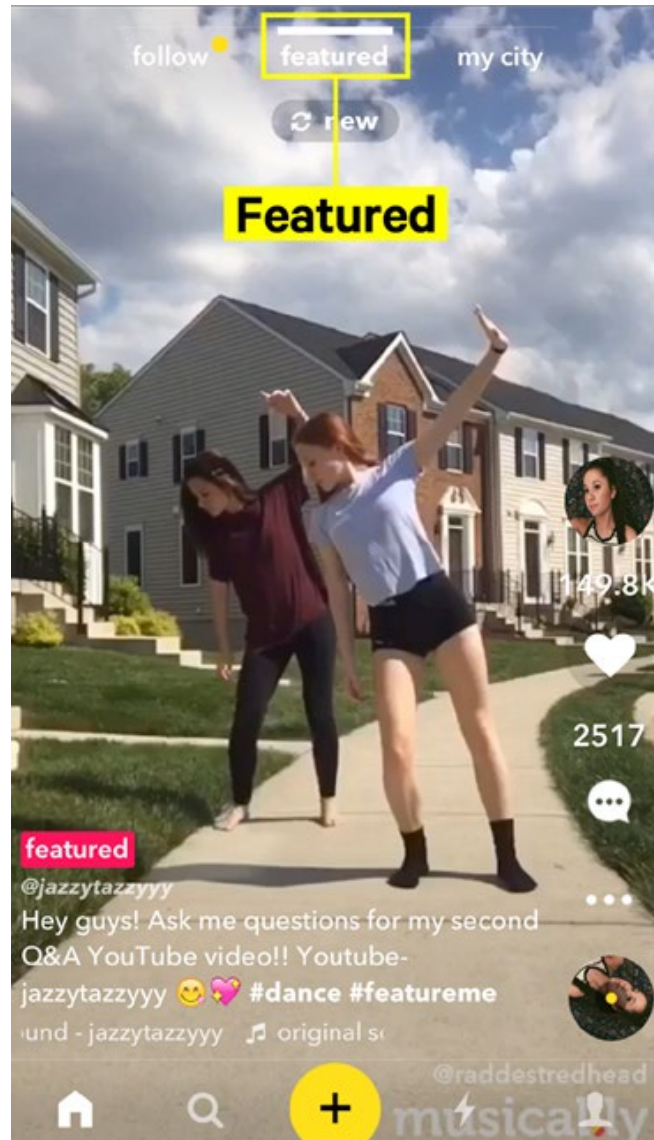
#### How you do this;

Click on the wheel in the top right of the screen, show in the image above. This will bring up a series of menu options. Hide location and private account are conveniently listed together. Flick the switch to green for both options.



## Features of the app

Once you have an account, the home screen provided will look similar to that below.



Across the top of the screen are the follow, featured and my city features.

**Follow** = allows the user to control who they wish to follow, either celebrities or friends. It's handy to point out that this function provides a user with an element of control as to what content they allow into their feed.

**Featured** = this provides the user with the best clips of the day, the most popular. It's common practices for users to hashtag their clip with the words #featureme, in the hope their likes will rocket up the popularity list.

**My City** = provides the user with a compilation of clips being uploaded from the area near them. This feature is the reason it's a great idea to turn OFF your location settings.

The icons running across the bottom of the screen let the user search within the app, access notifications, and personal profiles. The large yellow button is the first step to follow in creating a video.



## Making a video

This is a three step process, and there a variety of You-tube tutorials available to help. Baby Ariel, a Musical.ly superstar how-to's are safe and can be recommended.

**1. Choosing the music.** The app offers a wide variety of categories for a user to choose from. There is also the option to select a specific song. Musical.ly has a legal licence to use the music featured within the app, so there is no concern regarding involuntary breaches of copyright law.

**2. Shoot First.** This is where you film your clip. You can choose either front- or rear facing cameras on your device. This has some editing option to use, and allows the clip to be shot in a variety of different speeds. Video can be shot in Epic, Slow, Normal, Fast and Time Lapse modes to start, and in the editing feature there is a reverse mode, a time-trap to repeat and the ability to change speeds throughout the clip.

NB: additional editing features become available only after sharing the clip to an Instagram account. Additional apps containing different features are available separately through the app store, many of these are fake. Research the add-ons before purchasing. There are no in-app purchases associated with Musical.ly to date.

**3. Post the video** – simply by clicking the post button. You will also be given the opportunity to tag your friends and hashtag the post.

Every video contains the 'musers' user name, a caption and the name of the song, plus the artist. Hashtags can also be added, as Musical.ly often runs a series of challenges asking users to perform tasks in their clip.

The number of hearts on the right hand side represents the popularity of the clip, the ... option shows the comments, and shows the profile picture of the creator so the 'muser' can search the profile for other content if they like what they see.

## Additional features

**Q&A** – where a question is posed by one muser in a video, and it is answered by another in different clip. The two are then combined by the app in a 15 second clip.

**Duet** – this is a new way for users to collaborate on a clip. It's a split-screen effect featuring two people singing and dancing together, who don't have to be in the same location.

**Story feature** – users may now compile a series of clips into a 60 second video – or story.

## The problems

### Age restrictions and users base

The terms and service agreement is confused. While specifying the site is not for persons under the age of 13, the app at the same time requires users to be at least 18 years of age.

*“THE SERVICE IS NOT FOR PERSONS UNDER THE AGE OF 13 OR FOR ANY USERS PREVIOUSLY SUSPENDED OR REMOVED FROM THE SERVICE BY MUSICAL.LY. IF YOU ARE UNDER 13 YEARS OF AGE, YOU MUST NOT USE OR ACCESS THE SERVICE AT ANY TIME OR IN ANY MANNER. Furthermore, by using the Service, you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age.” – musical.ly*

Suffice to say, the app is designed for use for those over the age of 13, with parental supervision between the years of 13-18.

But.... The app has no age verification system in place, nor does it require a birthdate when setting up an account. It is easy to lie about ones age.

The app makes the additional statement that it:-

*“We do not knowingly collect information from children under 13 and we do not want it. We will take steps to delete it if we learn we have collected it.” – musical.ly*

If you are concerned that your child has started an account in breach of the age restrictions, Musical.ly does try to control this by monitoring its accounts and investigating any suspicious activity that is reported to it. Parents can e-mail at [privacy@musical.ly](mailto:privacy@musical.ly) and the company claims it will take steps to remove the information and terminate the account.

Any parent who has a look through the available videos can see that there are enormous amount of tweens using the site, with some users appearing as young as 8.

### No delete function

Once you have established a Muisca.ly account there is currently no way to delete it. You can physically remove the app from your device, but you cannot remove the account from the musical.ly community.

The apps creators state on their information site that they are currently in the process of formulating a way that a user can delete an account, but to date this is not yet possible. The user name and password will be necessary to delete the account.

## The default public account

Privacy settings need to be installed, so that only approved followers can view content. The app has a very strong focus on accumulating followers, or a 'fan-base', so you'll need to have your facts before you when speaking to your child about making their account private. It is likely to be a thing they will do reluctantly considering the way the app works.

## Validation and the fan-base culture of the site

Musical.ly is fan driven. Overtly promoting a sense of achievement in achieving high numbers of followers. Kids are in effect, being taught to market themselves. This poses problems in a number of areas.

Self-esteem issues - when a user doesn't achieve the popularity they feel their creativity deserves. While users of Musical.ly tend to be encouraging about people's efforts, not achieving the desired number of followers can be hurtful.

- o The desire for popularity can lead to poor judgment, in the effort to increase the number of likes from strangers.
- o A private account will reduce the exposure of a user's clips to a wider audience. Clips are only shown to already approved followers. This limits the function of the app, but protects from the user being followed by complete unknowns.
- o Private and public accounts – parents have stories of their children possessing additional public accounts, when their private ones fail to attract high numbers.
- o Fear of being denied access to the app, can lead to younger users failing to tell an adult about uncomfortable interactions with strangers on the app.

## Explicit and inappropriate lyrics not regulated

The video content on musical.ly is not monitored for explicit lyrics, and other inappropriate language. Younger users may not understand the content they are lip syncing to. The music featured is not orientated to children. There is no feature available to block this content.

Users are also exposed to other users' clips of inappropriate language and lyrics.

## Sexually inappropriate images

Musical.ly does an okay job of keeping this hidden, but it doesn't screen the content being uploaded. As is the case with most user-generated apps there will be adult content lurking. It has a fairly effective search filter e.g. a search for sex won't get you very far, but the hashtags seem to be the feature that undoes this good work. Late in 2016, a news story broke detailing multiple instances of child pornography present on the app.

<http://thenewdaily.com.au/life/tech/2016/11/03/musical-ly-app-pornography>

Since this, several of the search avenues mentioned in the story have been shut down.

However, the unregulated nature of the app, and the immense popularity with the younger market, has led to a large number of instances of children exposed to unwelcome content.

## Hashtags

Musers are able to hashtag the clips they make e.g. #featureme #dancing #singing. They are also able to search for similar content using the hashtags. Incorrect spelling and judicious use of abbreviations such as #f\*ckgirl, #barbie, #blackhole, #chocolatemilkshake have led to both samples of child pornography, and adults masturbating.

The app also runs competition using this feature such as the #DontJudgeMe campaign which was supposed to combat body shaming. Far from sending a message of positivity, musers proceeded to upload clips of themselves looking ugly, defeating the purpose completely. The clips were compiled and ended up on You-tube with over 120 million views. The comments were unpleasant, and the exercise failed badly.

While fun, the hashtag are the most commonly reported feature that have led to inappropriate material being located by younger users e.g. self –harm, pornography and video content

## Age of the users and how tweens and teens assess and view risks differently to adults

While the app is supposedly unlawful for children under 13, the reality is that many users are younger. And young internet users do not display the same sense of judgement that older ones do. In the comments section of musicals created by the younger users, phone numbers are exchanged, addresses are given, as are invitations to text and call.

These are seen on accounts set to public. There are requests for Snapchats, email accounts and other social media connections. This is completely unregulated, and it is entirely possible that not all those desiring contact with your child are children themselves.

Unsupervised, kids can make some awful mistakes. Simply by signing up for a Musical.ly account they authorize their clips to be shared on other social media sites. This has led to clips appearing on You-Tube and Facebook, where the level of criticism can be crushing.

## Cyberbullying

Musical.ly states that it takes bullying very seriously, and that any rude behaviour will lead to the removal of the bully's profile. A muser can make a complaint by taking a screen shot and forwarding it to info@musical.ly .

Kids are recommended to both block the person making rude comments and report them.

In reality, the app can be quite slow in responding to complaint and taking down offensive profiles.

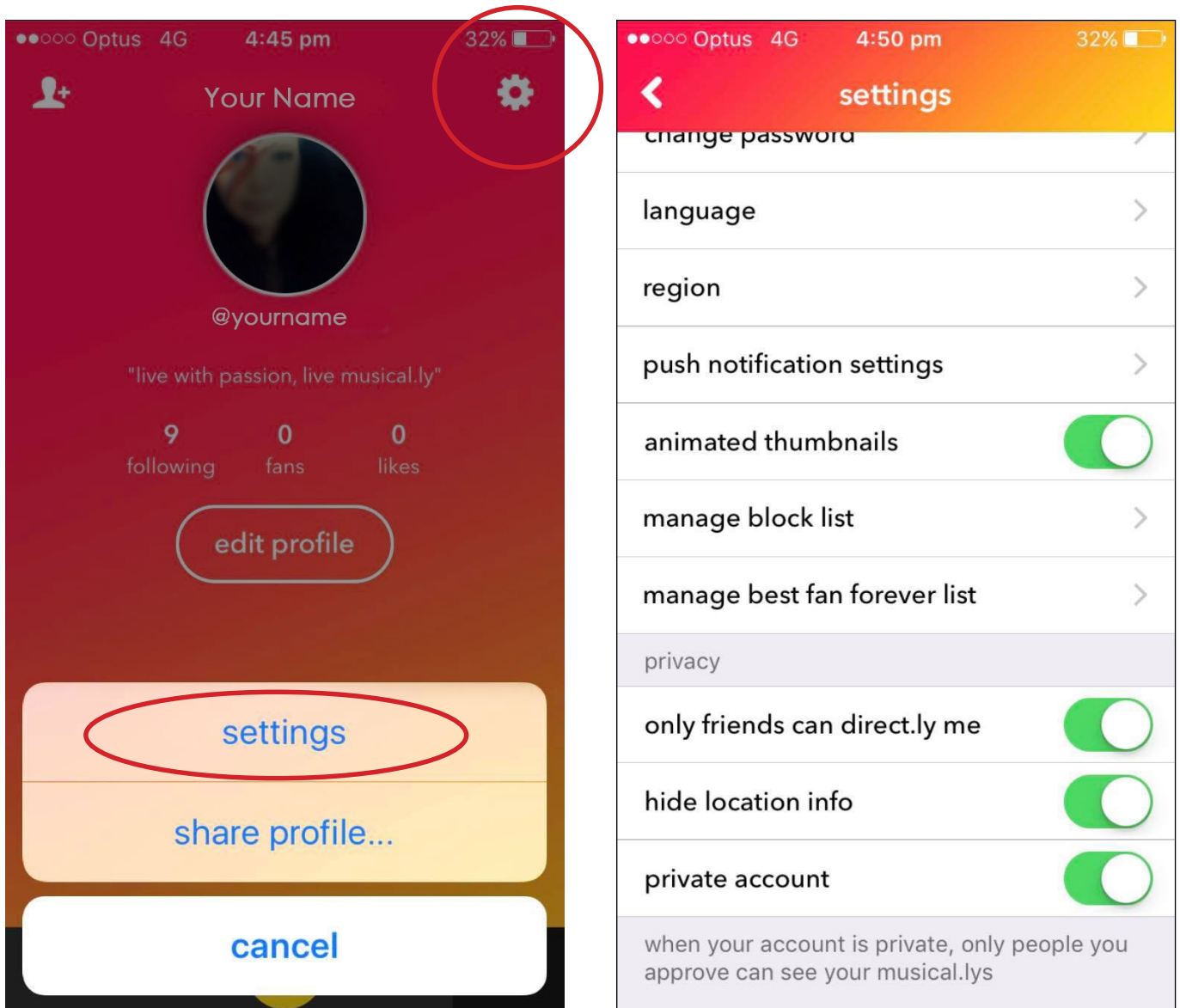
Blocking and reporting, plus informing an adult are the best ways to deal with repeated instances of online bullying.

## How to block on musical.ly

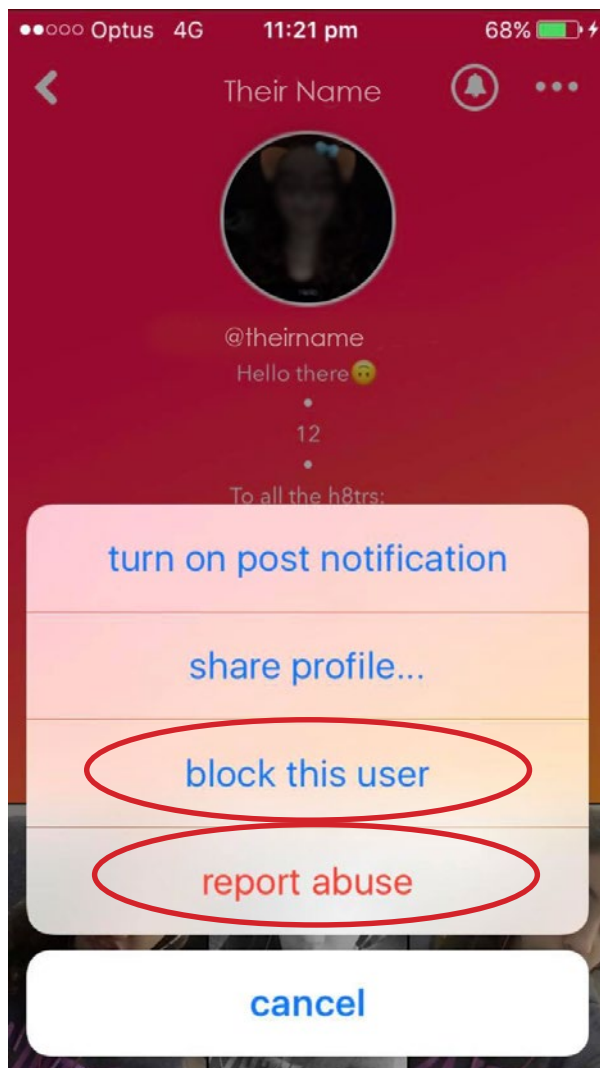
There are a couple of options on musical.ly that can both limit the people who can direct.ly message a user and completely block another user.

To ensure that only friends and approved contact can message the account holder, it is best to turn on the "only friends can direct.ly me" feature.

This can be accessed using the wheel to the top right of the musers profile page



To **block** a bully, or a user who is making inappropriate comments, the process is a little different. A user must go to the profile page of the person they wish to block. In the upper right corner of the profile is a series of three dots. Clicking on these will bring up a drop down menu with the options show below.



Both blocking and reporting the abuse can help to eliminate the bully. If this however is not successful, it is recommended that screen shots be taken and forwarded to musical.ly in an effort to have the account deleted. Send the complaint to [info@musical.ly](mailto:info@musical.ly).

### **The need to be careful of background images and uniforms worn**

A younger user may not pay attention to revealing details that an older person might see. School uniforms, classrooms, items on bedroom walls can give away information relating to the location of the poster such as what school they attend, or sporting clubs they play for. This is invaluable information for both predators and identity thieves.

Recently, a Sydney private school banned the use of the app amongst its junior school pupils, and wrote to parents explaining that numerous students had been filming clips for the app in school uniform, and the school was concerned with both the safety of the students, and the inappropriate dance moves the students were replicating.

## **My City and Location services**

My City provides the musers with the location of other videos being uploaded within their general area. This is specific for about a 50km radius. The benign theory behind this is so fellow users can build more networks of friends over shared musical tastes, but providing your general location could compromise safety.

If the Location service is turned off on both your device and as show before, in the apps controls, My City is unable to operate.

## **False Profiles**

In a literal sense, all the profiles of those under 13 year olds are false. In an actually sense, there are a lot of pre-teens with a musical.ly account. However as with most social media, it is best to assume that not everyone is who they say they are. Keeping a profile private, and only choosing followers a persona knows or who one has a connection with.

## **Fake ad-ons**

Musical.ly is free with no in app purchases. Its popularity has led to the creation of numerous fake-add-ons that pretend to be linked to musical.ly and claim to boost followers or give crowns (Crowns are given to ensure that authenticity of an account on musical.ly., and relate to content, popularity and engaging with followers.)

It should be noted that these add-ons are fake, cost money and have led to users accounts being hacked.



## **Livel.ly**

Released in May in 2106, Licel.ly saw more than 2 million downloads in one month. This is a live-streaming or real-time app. Affiliated with musical.ly the app gives users no limits on what they choose to share, and means they can communicate in real-time with their fans. This is exactly what it sounds like. A muser will be live on the internet, with no ability to edit the stream before it is shared across the world.

If a user has both apps, and has shared any private information on musical.ly any user on livel.ly may see it and contact them by private message without being a friend or a follower. Simply being a friend of a friend is sufficient.

### **Privacy**

Location services operating on the app will give away information about where the musers lives, and anything untoward in the background will contribute to the ability of predators and bullies to locate the child in the video. Children simply lack the judgement necessary to participate in live-streaming video coming directly from their homes or bedrooms. They could have literally hundreds of strangers in their room, watching them answer personal questions or responding to dares from their online fans (one example is a teenage boy offering to take all his clothes off when he reached 5000 likes).

Viewers can provide gifts, and emojis which is sweet, but can encourage kids into further risky behaviour online.

### **No age verification or content restrictions**

To watch the broadcasts, there is no registration or age verification of any kind. Meaning that even with a private account on musical.ly a child may participate in the live stream of another. There is also no content monitoring, leaving a child exposed to absolutely whatever. There have been all types of unsavoury content being live streamed to the accounts of younger users including masturbation, pornography, self-harm, drug use and suggestive requests from adult users.

### **Bullying**

There are far more recorded incidents of mean comments and bullying on this app than on musical.ly.

Livel.ly not an app that should be downloaded or used by a child. The potential risk of predators, bullying, inappropriate content is very high with any form of unregulated live-stream. Given that musical.ly is renowned for the hold it has on the pre-teen market (despite age restrictions) concerns are real and entirely valid for livel.ly.





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