

FAMILY

The Controversial Kid ASMR Community



The videos, which use quiet sounds to trigger “tingles,” can be a type of sensory play. But some outside the community—and at YouTube—worry that child-made ASMR skirts the edges of inappropriate content.

By Anna Lockhart



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It started in preschool for Gracie. She and her classmates were coloring with markers. The crinkling of the paper and the squeak of the markers made Gracie so tired that she put her head on the table and fell asleep. It kept happening, that tingly, drowsy feeling, when she heard tapping sounds or whispering. In 2011, when Gracie was 7, she learned that the feeling had a name: ASMR, which stands for autonomous sensory meridian response, the unscientific name for the relaxed, euphoric feeling some people report experiencing when they hear certain “triggers,” such as whispered voices,

crinkling paper, or fingernails tapping on a hard surface. Many people also call the feeling “tingles.”

The term was coined nearly a decade ago, and since then, ASMR has blossomed into a cultural oddity with a robust online community, largely centered around YouTube videos. These videos, though all intended to create that ASMR feeling, use a wide variety of tactics to get there. Sometimes it’s a person whispering into the camera, pretending to wash the viewer’s face or massage her head. There are also meditations; role plays of teachers, doctor visits, and even alien abductions; and disembodied hands tapping books or scratching bars of soap. Some people find chewing and “mouth sounds” tingle-inducing. There are ASMR celebrities with hundreds of thousands of devotees. There was even a [Super Bowl commercial](#) this year featuring Zoë Kravitz tapping a beer bottle, ASMR-style. And now there is an established community of kids making ASMR videos, too, and Gracie is part of it.

Now 15, Gracie, who is homeschooled and lives in Colorado, uploads several videos a week to her YouTube channel, Gracie K. (The kids in this piece, and their family members, are being identified by their first name only to protect minors’ privacy.) Sometimes she whispers diarylike updates about what’s going on in her life. Sometimes she shows viewers her artwork. Sometimes she [puts paper clips on her fingers](#) and taps on things (she’s not allowed to get acrylic nails). She talks to her viewers about recovering from anorexia, often in a soft, quiet voice.

Gracie made her first ASMR video just before she left home to go to rehab for an eating disorder. It was a 10-minute whispered makeup tutorial. When she left for treatment, she had about 7,000 subscribers to her channel. When she returned a month later, her video had garnered thousands more views, and her subscriber base had doubled.

Kid ASMR videos have a slightly different feel than their adult counterparts. Though both have elements of comfort and creativity, many kid ASMR videos skew playful and silly. Kids seem less likely to make videos featuring massage, for example. Many popular kid ASMR videos involve slime, eating snacks such as seaweed or sour candy, or variations on the theme of [“mean older sister does your makeup.”](#) Some kids seem like they’re just playing a pretend game with a camera trained on them. Others have the polished charisma of a grown-up TV personality. Some are teenagers, such as Gracie K. and Makenna, 13, of [Life With MaK](#), a channel with more than 1 million subscribers. Others are much younger—such as the 4-year-old Aoki, the star of [ASMR Toddler](#). These channels all have parental involvement—Makenna even got her mom to create her own ASMR account, [Life With Momma MaK](#).

There are also scores of lower-tech videos [made by children](#), many of whom appear

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unsupervised. In one, titled “Asmr doing your hair and realization,” a girl who looks to be 8 or 9 years old sits in a bathroom or closet filming herself whispering a hairstyle tutorial. (It wasn’t until I scrolled through the comments that I realized she had confused the word *realization* for *relaxation*.) In another grainy video, a young girl does a lengthy, rambling librarian role play at what seems to be a family desktop computer. During the video, someone offscreen calls “10 more minutes” and she freezes momentarily, as if the viewer has caught her in the act of something forbidden.

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With smartphones and iPads at their fingertips, it is easy for many minors to surf the web—and it’s also simple for them to upload content without adult help. Gracie’s mother, Cori, knew her daughter had a YouTube channel, but she just assumed that it was for her friends. “I had no idea she had so many followers, until she asked me for my bank-account number so that she could have a place to put her earnings!” she says. (YouTube allows users with 1,000 subscribers or 4,000 hours of viewings to run ads on their videos and make a profit.) Nichole, Makenna’s mother, says that Makenna told her she was making ASMR videos online. Though she thought it was strange at first, Nichole encouraged the hobby, and got more involved as the channel grew.

Gracie says that making ASMR videos was a lifeline for her when she was struggling with an eating disorder. She now uses her fame to help fans with similar struggles, answering about 30 to 40 messages a day via her Instagram account from teens and kids who are struggling with eating disorders or mental health. “When my eating disorder was really bad, ASMR was the only thing that made me feel better,” she says.

For Makenna, ASMR was a path to success as a YouTuber. “It’s pretty easy,” she says. “All you gotta do is whisper.”

Cori and Nichole say that YouTube has given their daughters confidence. “She’s just blossomed as a child,” Nichole says. According to her mother, Gracie has made enough money from her channel to afford a down payment on a house or car. “We treat it like a family business or a chore. She has a schedule,” Cori says.



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It's hard to say just who is watching these kids whispering into their iPad, and whether the audience is similar to that of adult ASMR. Makenna and Nichole say Google's analytics indicate that Makenna's viewers are mostly 18 to 24 years old. But Evan, 15, the creator of the channel [Evan's ASMR](#), says it's likely that the primary audience is younger people, that kids lie about their age on YouTube.

"If you enter a certain age, YouTube only lets you see certain kinds of videos," he explains. "So kids know to say they are 18, because they want to see everything."

Adults may enjoy kid ASMR, too—many people say they first experienced the feeling as children, and the videos may evoke nostalgic childhood memories. Katrina Rae Heston says that the sight and sound of her children playing pretend games trigger the feeling. "It's usually the most intense form I experience," she posted in response to a question I posed on an ASMR discussion group on Facebook. But she doesn't seek out ASMR made by kids online, because it makes her feel uncomfortable.

She is not alone in her discomfort. The whispering, the pretend closeness, the simulation of touch—it makes plenty of people squirm, even coming from ASMR videos made by adults. Some people find it inappropriate for children to be performing that sort of manufactured intimacy, or worry that it could expose them to harassing comments.

The YouTube user PaymoneyWubby explained his views on it in a video from the fall called "[Kids doing ASMR is a problem.](#)" His exact problem with kid ASMR was left vague, but he seemed to hint that it was sexual, and described a general "creepiness." His post sparked reply videos from [other critics](#) and from [ASMR fans](#) and creators [defending](#) kid ASMR. Heavily featured in PaymoneyWubby's video was a video by Makenna, in which she noisily eats raw honeycomb. Makenna says it was the honeycomb video that made her channel explode in popularity. Suddenly, kid ASMR was getting a lot of attention.

Even some ASMR fans have their reservations about this genre. "I remember years ago, before the ASMR community, there was a video of a girl at some family function playing with her mom or someone's hair. It had a crazy amount of views! I watched it all the time," Brandi Modisette told me via the Facebook ASMR Research and Discussion group. "As much as they trigger me, I just feel weird watching them on YouTube now. Unfortunately all I can think about are all the creeps."

Sadly, creeps are a real concern. Child-made ASMR videos raised alarms for YouTube when the company started seeing more of them about a year ago, says Jessica Mason, the policy and copyright communications lead at Google, which owns YouTube. She says the company has consulted psychiatrists and ASMR experts who have said that people seek out ASMR to help with insomnia, anxiety, and stress. But the company

has still been wary—though ASMR isn't necessarily sexual, it is inherently sensual, and sometimes pushes up against the blurry line of what can be considered inappropriate. The company monitors any content featuring minors, Mason says, but ASMR in particular gave them pause. Adult ASMR sometimes does veer into sexual territory, with intentionally seductive videos and girlfriend or boyfriend role plays.

"ASMR can bleed into content that seems to sexualize minors," Mason says. "Excessively focusing on the mouth, close-ups, things like that ... It's a tricky line because we welcome ASMR, we know there are benefits to it, but we can't let everything through. We never have good data on what kids are doing because of all of the restrictions around studying kids, researching kids."

YouTube's policy says that no one under 13 is allowed to launch and operate a channel (Makenna started her channel when she was 12). Any channel starring a child that looks like it doesn't have parental involvement is flagged, questioned, and deleted if no adults can verify that they run it. Many ASMR channels starring kids have the disclaimer "This is a parent-run account." From the time I began reporting this story to now, I saw several kid ASMR videos disappear from the platform.

Makenna's honeycomb video brought her notoriety and a large following—but it also flagged concerns for YouTube. YouTube forbids content featuring minors "engaged in provocative, sexual, or sexually suggestive activities," according to its community guidelines. According to Mason, that and other videos were flagged by the company's "reviewers," people around the world who flag things that seem to run afoul of these guidelines—for the honeycomb video, it was the "mouth sounds" that were deemed inappropriate. "YouTube told us specifically that they do not allow minors to eat honeycomb on their platform," Nichole says.

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Makenna has had many other videos deleted: her "Sassy Police Officer Pulls You Over" video, a video featuring a tarantula, another in which she is breaking an iPhone screen, a gift-unwrapping video.

And then there are the comments. Over the past several months, according to Mason, YouTube has noticed a disturbing phenomenon of commenters on videos of children—usually innocuous videos, such as home movies or gymnastics performances—making inappropriate remarks: comments about their appearance, time stamps highlighting brief moments when a child appears to be in a compromising position or flashing some skin. Worse yet, pedophiles were exchanging information and web links in these comment sections, meaning these videos were separated from child pornography by just a couple of clicks. It is not clear if links like these were shared under ASMR videos in particular, but they could have been.

Mason says YouTube has trained machine-learning devices and human monitors to comb through videos for incriminating content. They flag and delete comments, disable accounts, and report thousands of accounts to authorities. After discovering thousands of offending comments, the company decided to disable comments entirely on any videos featuring a minor until it can find a better solution to the problem. This took effect in January.

“I have seen some stuff on YouTube that I wish I hadn’t seen,” Gracie says. Before comments were disabled, she and her mother filtered out comments, as did Makenna and her mother, that included certain words and phrases, such as *ugly* and *Kill yourself*. Most of the comments they removed weren’t sexual, but of a bullying nature. Gracie and Makenna say that method was enough to make them feel safe, and that they wish YouTube hadn’t done away with comments entirely.

“I always tell my subscribers that I’m only one comment away, and now they can’t really reach me, because there’s not a way to communicate,” Gracie says.

For now, kid ASMR is able to continue with only occasional disruption. Jason Nolan, a professor of early-childhood studies at Ryerson University in Canada suggests that ASMR might be beneficial for kids whose childhood is overscheduled and largely indoors, lacking sensory play. “Children in less modern and urbanized contexts may have more time to play outdoors, climb things, lie in the grass and watch the clouds as tree leaves whisper in the wind,” he says. “The multisensory world of a child with regular and sustained access to unstructured play in natural environments may itself may be a form of ASMR-like experiences.” Making or watching these videos, he thinks, could provide similar sensory play for kids.

Makenna, for her part, has a slightly less enchanted view.

“I’m not sure I’ll keep doing ASMR into high school,” she says. “There’s always going to be something on the internet everyone’s doing. I’m going to watch to see if it goes downhill and go from there.”

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