

Social Networking Sites: A Parent's Guide



Your teen's
information here

"It's 10 p.m. Do you know where your children are?"

Remember that phrase from your own childhood? It's still a valid question, but now, it comes with a twist: "Do you know where your kids are — and who they're chatting with online?"

Social networking sites have morphed into a mainstream medium for teens and adults. These sites encourage and enable people to exchange information about themselves, share pictures and videos, and use blogs and private messaging to communicate with friends, others who share interests, and sometimes even the world-at-large. And that's why it's important to be aware of the possible pitfalls that come with networking online.

Some social networking sites attract pre-teens — even kids as young as 5 or 6. These younger-focused sites don't allow the same kinds of communication that teens and adults have, but there are still things that parents can do to help young kids socialize safely online. In fact, when it comes to young kids, the law provides some protections — and gives parents some control over the type of information that children can disclose online. For sites directed to children under age 13, and for general audience sites that know they're dealing with kids younger than 13, there's the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). It requires these sites to get parental consent before they collect, maintain, or use kids' information. COPPA also allows parents to review their child's online profiles and blog pages.

Facts for Consumers

Parents sometimes can feel outpaced by their technologically savvy kids. Technology aside, there are lessons that parents can teach to help kids stay safer as they socialize online.

HELP KIDS SOCIALIZE SAFELY ONLINE

The Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection agency, urges parents to talk to their tweens and teens about social networking sites, and offers these tips for using these sites safely:

- **Help your kids understand what information should be private.** Tell them why it's important to keep some things — about themselves, family members and friends — to themselves. Information like their full name, Social Security number, street address, phone number, and family financial information — like bank or credit card account numbers — is private and should stay that way. Tell them not to choose a screen name that gives away too much personal information.
- **Use privacy settings to restrict who can access and post on your child's website.** Some social networking sites have strong privacy settings. Show your child how to use these settings to limit who can view their online profile, and explain to them why this is important.
- **Explain that kids should post only information that you — and they — are comfortable with others seeing.** Even if privacy settings are turned on, some — or even all — of your child's profile may be seen by a broader audience than you're comfortable with. Encourage your child to think about the language used in a blog, and to think before posting pictures and videos. Employers, college admissions officers, team coaches, and teachers may view your child's postings. Even a kid's screen name could make a difference. Encourage teens to think about the impression that screen names could make.
- **Remind your kids that once they post information online, they can't take it back.** Even if they delete the information from a site, older versions may exist on other people's computers and be circulated online.
- **Know how your kids are getting online.** More and more, kids are accessing the Internet through their cell phones. Find out about what limits you can place on your child's cell phone. Some cellular companies have plans that limit downloads, Internet access, and texting; other plans allow kids to use those features only at certain times of day.
- **Talk to your kids about bullying.** Online bullying can take many forms, from spreading rumors online and posting or forwarding private messages without the sender's OK, to sending threatening messages. Tell your kids that the words they type and the images they post can have real-world consequences. They can make the target of the bullying feel bad, make the sender look bad — and, sometimes, can bring on punishment from the authorities. Encourage your kids to talk to you if they feel targeted by a bully.
- **Talk to your kids about avoiding sex talk online.** Recent research shows that teens who don't talk about sex with strangers online are less likely to come in contact with a predator.

If you're concerned that your child is engaging in risky online behavior, you can search the blog sites they visit to see what information they're posting. Try searching by their name, nickname, school, hobbies, grade, or area where you live.

- **Tell your kids to trust their gut if they have suspicions.** If they feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, encourage them to tell you. You can then help them report concerns to the police and to the social networking site. Most sites have links where users can immediately report abusive, suspicious, or inappropriate online behavior.
- **Read sites' privacy policies.** Spend some time with a site's privacy policy, FAQs, and parent sections to understand its features and privacy controls. The site should spell out your rights as a parent to review and delete your child's profile if your child is younger than 13.

A FEW MORE TIPS TO PROTECT PRE-TEENS

Many of the tips above apply for pre-teens, but parents of younger children also can:

- **Take extra steps to protect younger kids.** Keep the computer in an open area like the kitchen or family room, so you can keep an eye on what your kids are doing online. Use the Internet with them to help develop safe surfing habits. Consider taking advantage of parental control features on some operating systems that let you manage your kids' computer use, including what sites they can visit, whether they can download items, or what time of day they can be online.
- **Go where your kids go online.** Sign up for — and use — the social networking spaces that your kids visit. Let them know that you're there, and help teach them how to act as they socialize online.
- **Review your child's friends list.** You may want to limit your child's online "friends" to people your child actually knows and is friendly with in real life.

- **Understand sites' privacy policies.** Sites should spell out your rights as a parent to review and delete your child's profile if your child is younger than 13.

WHAT TO DO IF THERE'S A PROBLEM

Encourage your kids to tell you if they feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online. Then report it right away to the police and the social networking site.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires websites to obtain parental consent before collecting, using, or disclosing personal information from children under age 13. If a website is violating COPPA, report it to the Federal Trade Commission.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about staying safe online, visit the websites of the following organizations:

Federal Trade Commission

www.onguardonline.gov

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261.

The FTC manages OnGuardOnline.gov, which provides practical tips from the federal government and the technology industry to help you be on guard against Internet fraud, secure your computer, and protect your personal information.

Facts for Consumers

ConnectSafely

www.connectsafely.org

ConnectSafely is a forum for parents, teens, educators, and advocates designed to give teens and parents a voice in the public discussion about youth online safety, and has tips, as well as other resources, for safe blogging and social networking. Along with NetFamilyNews.org, it is a project of the non-profit Tech Parenting Group.

Cyberbully411

www.cyberbully411.org

Cyberbully411 provides resources and opportunities for discussion and sharing for youth — and their parents — who have questions about or may have been targeted by online harassment. The website was created by the non-profit Internet Solutions for Kids, Inc., with funding from the Community Technology Foundation of California.

GetNetWise

www.getnetwise.org

GetNetWise is a public service sponsored by Internet industry corporations and public interest organizations to help ensure that Internet users have safe, constructive, and educational or entertaining online experiences. The GetNetWise coalition works to provide Internet users with the resources they need to make informed decisions about their and their family's use of the Internet.

Internet Keep Safe Coalition

www.iKeepSafe.org

iKeepSafe.org is a coalition of 49 governors/first spouses, law enforcement, the American Medical

Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other associations dedicated to helping parents, educators, and caregivers by providing tools and guidelines to promote safe Internet and technology use among children.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

www.missingkids.com; www.netsmartz.org

NCMEC is a private, non-profit organization that helps prevent child abduction and sexual exploitation; helps find missing children; and assists victims of child abduction and sexual exploitation, their families, and the professionals who serve them.

Staysafe

www.staysafe.org

Staysafe.org is an educational site intended to help consumers understand both the positive aspects of the Internet as well as how to manage a variety of safety and security issues that exist online.

Wired Safety

www.wiredsafety.org

WiredSafety.org is an Internet safety and help group. WiredSafety.org provides education, assistance, and awareness on cybercrime and abuse, privacy, security, and responsible technology use. It is also the parent group of Teenangels.org, FBI-trained teens and preteens who promote Internet safety.

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

ftc.gov

1-877-FTC-HELP

FOR THE CONSUMER

Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Division of Consumer and Business Education

September 2007