

What are social networking sites?

In today's world, children interact in the virtual world as often as they do in the "real" world. Although this trend concerns parents and adults, the Internet has many positive aspects. It offers many opportunities for education and, in a number of ways, makes life easier for all of us.

Children and teens use the Internet for socializing in addition to the previously noted utilitarian aspects. This tendency to socialize "virtually" – or online – is likely to continue to grow as generations pass. While parents can limit the amount of time that children spend on the Internet, children need to learn to how to become "net-smart" just as much as they need to learn more traditional life skills.

Virtual socializing takes place on sites such as MySpace, Facebook or other similar Web sites, where kids can sign up for free and put up a personal profile. They can also post comments on other peoples' profiles. They can "meet" people online, have discussions and share interests.

While much of this is innocent socializing, there are real dangers associated with these social networking sites. Some of these dangers involve what other people can do, and some of them involve your own child getting into trouble inadvertently. The goal is simple: we want to let you know the dangers, so you can teach your child about them – the same way you teach your child about the dangers of the road when they learn to drive a car.

Questions you may have before you sit down to have "the talk"

Why are teens so attracted to social networking sites?

Part of adolescence is trying on different identities, and these sites make this easy and fun. Also, kids generally think that these Web sites are uninhabited by adults.

Do kids really post personal information?

A Northwestern University study found that more than two-thirds of children and teens posted personal information in their profile.

What else do kids do on these sites?

Sometimes as a joke, kids may post cruel or unflattering things about other teens or personal information about other children. Sometimes they pose as other people online by using their name, screen name, photo, or other identifiers. Having a friend's login and password is a badge of honor, so even kids who are excellent students sometimes do this, and they're often totally unaware of the very serious repercussions.

Why is posting personal information a risk?

1. It can be used by pedophiles to track down, find and pursue your child.
2. It can be used by other teens or adults to stalk, harass or bully your child.
3. It can be used to steal your child's identity, or even your identity.

The Internet is a written record that can be more permanent than publishing an article in a newspaper because words can be forwarded, re-posted, blogged, listed anywhere, a million times over. Nothing posted online is "private" in any sense.

Principles and guidelines for parents to communicate to their children

1. The Internet counts.

If it's illegal in person, it's illegal online. Just because you know you're joking, doesn't mean they will. Joking or not, threats, stalking and harassment are illegal and can result in prosecution. If you wouldn't want it on a billboard, don't post it on the Internet.

2. Yes, adults see what you're doing.

If you don't want your parents, boss, teachers to see it, then don't put it online. Kids think "private" profiles are really private, but they are absolutely not. Even a "private" profile can be read and copied. In many cases, you can and will be traced. The Internet is not as anonymous as you may think, and police respond to illegal postings online every day.

3. Don't let your emotions rule your typing.

If you're upset or mad, log off for a while. Never respond to a message or a posting if you are upset or mad. It may be tempting to take revenge, but don't give in to that temptation! Even if you were originally the victim, if you take revenge, you could be the one who gets prosecuted or in trouble.

4. Posing as someone else online could result in criminal charges.

Posting a fake profile by using someone else's name, photo, or identifying information (no matter what the content of that fake profile); using someone else's name or username or password; using a very similar screen name, plus that person's real name (posing as that person online using their information) can easily result in your being charged with identity theft, which is a serious crime.

5. If someone bullies you online ...

Never respond. Save the message. Tell an adult. If physical threats or violence are part of the message, tell the police.

6. Your personal information can be used to bully or harass you.

Personal information means any information that can be used to identify you: your name, photo, phone number, address, town, the name of a team you play on, etc. Undercover online police have successfully tracked down kids based only on their first names and athletic team names. Sensitive information is anything you don't want everyone to see such as embarrassing or dumb things you've done or said.

7. Online friends are strangers, no matter how long you've "known" them.

It's easy to pose as someone else online. No matter how many years you've corresponded with people online, they are strangers. They may not feel like strangers, but you don't really know them. Never agree to meet them or call them. Tell your parents if they want to meet you.

As with most things ... prevention is easier than reaction. Just talking about these issues will help your child a lot. If you have further questions, contact us or visit these Web sites: www.isafe.org, www.cyberbully.org or www.cyberbullying.ca.



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How to respond to online bullying if it has already happened

1. Encourage your child to spend less time on-line, but consider carefully before banning the computer.
2. Look up and review the hosting site's policy. Send the host a copy of the Web page and a copy of its own policy. Demand that the host remove the page.
3. If the child who posted online is under 13, then under the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), the host must remove the site immediately.
4. Always monitor your child's site and the sites of any friends on which they may be posting.
5. If it's spilling over into school, notify the school immediately. School administrators will often work with police or parents to take action and help to resolve the problem.

Should I monitor my child online?

Sit your children down and tell them that the Internet is not a place where they can expect privacy, and that you are responsible for their safety and will be monitoring what they do online. Explain that what they do online is never private. There is software, like McGruff (www.gomcgruff.com), that allows you to monitor your child online. If you warn your child in advance that they can't expect privacy, then you'll avoid arguments about it later.

Social Networking



A guide for parents

What are social networking sites?

Why are these sites attractive to teens?

What are the dangers associated with these sites?