
Common Sense on Social Networking

What are social networking sites?

Social networking sites are places where kids can hang out together online. When you sign up for a social networking site like MySpace or Facebook, you get a profile page (your own space and name) to post pictures of yourself and your friends, artwork, videos, links to songs, and your personal thoughts.

You can invite your friends to connect to your profile. Eventually, kids can have hundreds, or even thousands, of “friends” linked to their page. Friends can chat and write comments on one another’s pages.

Social networking sites can be accessed on a computer or cell phone.

Why do social networking sites matter?

Social networking sites are great places to connect with friends and people with shared interests. They are also places for kids to express their creativity and explore their identities. But lots of kids post racy pictures, write inappropriate comments, and talk about drinking or doing drugs.

Unless your children use privacy controls, everything on their profile page can be seen by people other than their friends. There are many stories about kids who did not get a job they wanted or into their favorite college because of something on their profile.

To limit who can view their information, kids must use privacy settings. But even if your kids think they have used privacy controls, there are different ways to see people’s pages. So kids have to be careful about what they post.

What can parents do?

Tips for parents of young kids:

- » **Make sure your children visit only those sites that are okay for their age.** For kids 5-8, there are sites like Club Penguin or Webkinz with a lot of safety tools that help kids play without taking big chances.

Tips for parents of middle school kids:

- » **Facebook and MySpace state that their sites are not for kids under 13.** But it is easy to lie about your age because there is no way for the company to check.
- » **Ask your kids if they use these sites, so you can help them be safe.** If for some reason you think your kid is using Facebook or MySpace, but she says she isn't, there are ways to find out. Just click "History" on your Internet browser (Firefox, Internet Explorer, Yahoo, etc.). If you see either of these sites, your kids may have an account at one of them.
- » **Tell your kids to think before they post something.** Remind them that everything can be seen by people they don't know. Each family is different, but for middle school kids it's a good idea for you to have access to your kids' pages just to be sure that what they're posting is okay. Parents can help keep their children from posting something they will regret so they will not be sorry later.
- » **Make sure your kids use privacy controls.** Show them where the privacy controls are.
- » **Set some rules for what is and is not okay for your kids to communicate, play, and post online.** Posts that show them using drugs, drinking, or any sexual activity will be with them forever.
- » **Encourage your kids to be kind.** Lots of sites have applications like "bathroom wall" or "honesty boxes" that let users tell friends what they think of their friends' postings. Just remember that if your child would not say something to someone's face, he should not post it.
- » **Go online.** Get an account for yourself. See what kids can and can't do.

Tips for parents of high school teens:

- » **Talk with them about their digital world.** Remind them that anyone can see what is on their pages — even if they think no one will. When they apply for a job or to a college, people may look at their pages. Ask your teens to think about who might see their pages and what those people might think about the posts or photos they see.
- » **Let them know that anything they create or communicate can be cut, changed, pasted, and sent around.** Once your teen puts something on her page, it is out of her control and can be used to hurt her or someone else. This includes talk and photos of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Tell your kids that online stuff can last forever. If they would not put something on the hallway in school, they should not post it on their pages.
- » **Remind them not to say something about or to someone else that they would not want said about them.**
- » **If they decide to meet someone in person, it must be in public.** Even better, they should bring a friend along. Remind your kids that it is never a good or safe idea to meet with strangers.
- » **Tell them to watch the time.** Social network sites can use a lot of time. Hours and hours can go by, and this does not help with homework.

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