

Social Networking & Safety Online

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It was 1990. I heard rapid-fire clicking in the family office. I looked and saw my son's fingers typing high-speed on the keyboard. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm talking to Luke on IM." Of course he had to explain IM (instant messaging). I said, "Why don't you just call him on the phone?" His reply: "This way I can also talk to all my other friends at the same time." That was my first introduction to "non-verbal" chatting and social networking.

Today, social networking sites and virtual communities are IM on steroids. Look around in public places or, unfortunately, in automobiles and you will see people tethered to their technology. Everywhere you look fingers are whizzing across keypads of media devices. I read that some teens send and receive six to eight thousand texts a month and spend hours and hours online.

It's the new world and it isn't going away. There are enough internet community and social networking sites, chat rooms, message boards, Skype exchanges, and IM services to mystify and confuse anyone not technologically savvy.

There are things everyone should be reminded of. These sites are the bulletin boards of people's lives. All parents, even with their own Facebook, Twitter or the like accounts, need to be concerned about what their children are doing, saying and posting online.

People who have less-than-friendly intentions, hackers, spammers, identity thieves, virus writers and other criminals follow the traffic.

REMINDERS FOR ALL USERS

1. Some sites have privacy policies and ways to regulate who gets which levels of access to the site. Others are totally public. Know the difference. Find out your filtering options and use the privacy settings. Find out if your site monitors content that people post.
2. Read the privacy policies so you know exactly what information is collected and how it's used.
3. Social networking sites own all the data you upload to the site. They can sell it to advertisers, marketers and data brokers, and they can allow police to search its database on request. They can also change their features and amend their rules anytime.

4. Comments you post are permanently recorded on the community site. Once it is posted, even if deleted, it may have been captured and archived forever somewhere. You cannot control information you give to third parties.
5. Profiles are public. Don't post information you are uncomfortable sharing with the world. The more you reveal, the more vulnerable you are to scams, spam and identity theft. Don't post others' personal information!
6. Use Anonymous Post blocking options so people you don't know cannot comment on your blog.
7. Always type the address of your social networking site rather than click on a link. You might be entering your account name and password into a fake site.
8. Think twice before using social networking sites at work unless it's for a work-related reason.
9. Consider not posting photos. They can be altered and broadcast in ways you don't like. If you do post one, ask: "Would I or my parents display this in the living room?" If you do post photos always assume anyone can see them.
10. Flirting online can be very dangerous. Don't make it easy for strangers to find you.

MONITOR YOUR OWN ONLINE REPUTATION

1. Search your name in several popular search engines to see where you are mentioned and in what context. Surround your name in quotations to find what only applies to you. Also search your middle name, nick name, email address, personal website domain name, social security and credit card numbers to make sure they don't appear anywhere online.
2. Check online phone directories, genealogy sites, alumni sites and websites of organizations you belong to.
3. Check your friends' and family members' sites to see if they are commenting about you.
4. Don't mix private and public lives online. Use different email addresses for different online activities.
5. Take action if you find something being posted that is unflattering, embarrassing or untrue. Contact the website owner or administrator and ask them to remove it.
6. Watch online language and content.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Take extra steps to protect pre-teens. Keep the computer in an open area so you can keep an eye on what kids are doing online. Many believe middle school or younger children should not be social networking. Never let them give out personal information without your permission. Consider using parental controls.

With teens, balance your child's need for privacy and self-expression with concerns about safety and responsibility. Focus your energy on appropriate posting and safety information. Help your children understand what information should be private and why.

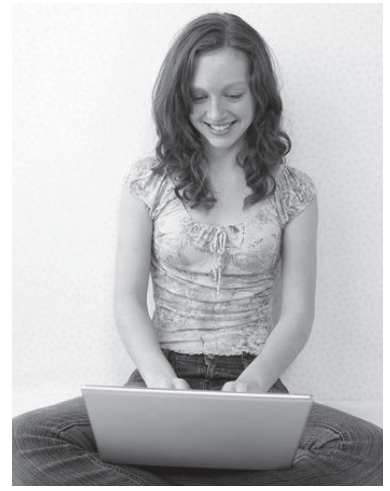
1. Make sure they use sites with strong privacy settings and that they have created safe privacy settings. Make sure they are for "friends only."
2. Become involved in their online life. Familiarize yourself with the websites your children like to visit most.
3. Learn the texting language.
4. Teach them codes of conduct.
5. Remind them that once information is posted online, it can't be taken back.
6. Look at what they are doing. Enter your child's name surrounded by quotation marks for an exact search. Search the names of their friends. If there is a picture of your child, the name on the picture will be on your child's website. Search their school name, too.
7. Review your child's friends list. Make sure the friends are people they actually know in real life.
8. Know how your children are getting online. Find out what limits you can set on your child's cell phone.
9. Tell kids to think about their photos and entries before posting. Anything that can be downloaded can be forwarded so ask: "Do you want the world to see that photo or post?"

10. Remind them that blogs and sites can be viewed by college admissions staff or potential employers who may make admission or hiring decisions based on the comments.

11. Warn them about the dangers of sex talk and flirting online and meeting strangers they have talked to online.

12. Talk about Cyber bullying which ranges from spreading rumors and posting private information to writing threatening messages. Explain to your children that what they type and the images they post can have real-world consequences. Ask them to let you know if they feel targeted by an online bully.

13. Explain that some people who ask to be your friend may not be using real names. Sexual predators and others have the anonymous nature of the online world to their advantage.



SAFETY SITES FOR MORE INFORMATION:

www.kids.getnetwise.org
www.onguardonline.gov
www.getwise.org
www.iKeepSafe.org
www.i-safe.org
www.staysafeonline.org
www.common sense.com
www.connectsafely.org

EAP Can Help!

Your EAP is a confidential, assessment, short-term counseling and referral program for you and your family members. It is a free benefit provided to you by your organization.

1.800.769.9819 ~ TTY dial 711 for TRS then dial 800.769.9819

Online Work/Life Services

If your organization offers Online Work/Life Services, visit our 24-hour internet resource for information, advice and support on a wide variety of issues. Contact your human resources department for a company code then check our Work/Life Services at www.affiliatedeap.com

