

Common Sense on Social Networks

Some facts

- > 55% of teens have an online profile on a site like Facebook or MySpace.
- > Each site has privacy controls.
- > Inappropriate contact happens.
- > Both sites require kids be older than 14 to have a page – but kids lie about their ages.
- > What gets posted is there forever, somewhere. Deleting an account is difficult.

Where's their favorite hangout? Online.

It's 8:30 on a school night – do you know where your child is? Sure, he's at his computer, but if he's like most kids, he's on a social networking site. But do you know what he's doing? It's a whole other world and we'll help you understand (instead of worry) where your kids are hanging out.

What are they?

An online social network is like any meeting ground, group, or club. The sites work pretty simply: Anyone who signs up (for free) gets a page to do with whatever they like. Although many exist, MySpace and Facebook are the most popular. Kids post pictures of themselves, artwork, links to songs, and write about what they enjoy. They are great outlets for creativity and voicing opinions.

These sites also form a communication hub with all sorts of options, from Instant Messaging on MySpace to "writing on someone's wall" or "poking" someone on Facebook. Both sites offer the cyber equivalent of "clubs" you can join. On Facebook, there are also thousands of applications that let kids play games with their friends, send hugs and drinks, or download quizzes and profiles.

Why they matter

Unless your child uses privacy controls, everything he says about himself in pictures or words will be available for all the world to see. And people do see these pages – strangers, college admissions officers, even potential employers. Kids are savvy enough to post things, but not always mature enough to understand the consequences of doing it.

Even if your kids think they have figured out their privacy controls, there are different ways to get into people's pages. That's why revealing personal information is worrisome.

Tips for young kids

- **Social networks are not for kids under 14 unless they are specifically designed for tween ages.** Kids lack the maturity to make smart, responsible decisions all the time.

Tips for middle school kids

- **Common Sense does not recommend this for your middle school kids.** That said, we know that kids like to “age up” so really it’s an individual family decision.
- **Ask them if they have an account.** They may not fess up if they think they will get in trouble. But it’s more important for you to know they have one than for them to be appearing to play by your rules.
- **Review the basics of Internet safety** with your kids – whether or not they say they have an account. Nothing identifiable, no meeting people.
- **Make sure they set their privacy settings.** They aren’t foolproof, but they’re important. Show them where the privacy settings are.
- **Set ground rules** for what is and isn’t appropriate for your kids to communicate, play, and post online.
- **Go online. Get an account for yourself.** Explore it, then have your kids link to you so you can monitor what they’re doing and saying. And do a search for their friends and see if your child shows up on their sites.

Tips for high school kids

- **Ask them to show you their sites.** They may object, but they’re still under your roof.
- **Tell them the rules: No drugs, no alcohol.** Remind them that anyone can see what’s on their pages – even if they think no one will. Potential employers and college admissions people can find their way around these sites.
- **Kindness counts.** Lots of these sites have things like “honesty boxes” that allow users to tell their friends what they think of them. Rule of thumb: If they wouldn’t want someone saying it to them, they shouldn’t say it to anyone else.
- **Watch the clock.** Kids can get so sucked into their pages that hours and hours can go by. Not the best use of their time.
- **If they meet someone, it better be in a public place, preferably with a friend.** We would all like to think that kids wouldn’t meet strangers – but sometimes they do. Stress to your kids this is not a safe or smart idea.

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