

Teaching Kids to Be Smart About Social Media

For kids and teens, social media is an essential part of their lives, much the way telephones were important to us at their age.

About 90% of teens have used some form of social media and 75% have a profile on a social networking site, experts say. More than half of all American teens visit social networking sites every day. These numbers are way up from just a few years ago, and there's almost no chance of them ever coming down again.

There are plenty of good things about social media — but also many potential dangers and things that you want your kids and teens to avoid. They don't always make the smartest choices when they post something to a site like Facebook or YouTube, and sometimes this can lead to problems.

So it's important for parents to teach their kids how to use social media wisely.

The Good

Social media can help kids:

- stay connected with friends and family
- volunteer or get involved with a campaign, nonprofit, or charity
- enhance their creativity through the sharing of ideas, music, and art
- meet and interact with others who share similar interests

The Bad

The flipside is that social media can be a hub for things like cyberbullying and questionable activities. Without meaning to, kids can easily share more online than they should.

One study showed that 9 out of 10 teens post photos of themselves online or use their real names on their profiles; 8 out of 10 reveal their birthdates and interests; and 7 out of 10 post their school name and the town where they live. Actions like this can make kids easy targets for online predators and others who might want to cause them harm.

These statistics about teens highlight the dangers of social media:

- 17% of teens say they've been contacted online by someone they didn't know in a way that made them feel scared or uncomfortable
- 30% of teens say they've received online advertising that was inappropriate for their age
- 39% of teens admitted to lying about their age to gain access to websites

Concerns and Consequences

In addition to problems like cyberbullying and online predators, kids also can face the possibility of a physical encounter with the wrong person. Many newer apps automatically reveal the poster's location when they're used. This can tell anyone out there exactly where to find the person using the app.

And photos, videos, and comments made online usually can't be taken back once they're posted. Even after a teen thinks something has been deleted, it can be impossible to completely erase it from the Internet.

Posting an inappropriate photo can damage a kid's reputation in ways that may cause problems years later — such as when a potential employer or college admissions officer does a background check. And if a kid sends a mean-spirited tweet as a joke, it could be very hurtful to someone else and even taken as a threat.

Spending too much time on social media can be a downer, too. By seeing how many "friends" others have and viewing pictures of them having fun, kids may feel worse about themselves or feel they don't measure up to their peers.

What Parents Can Do

It's important to be aware of what your kids are doing online, but prying too much can alienate them and damage the trust you've built together. The key is to stay involved in a way that makes your kids understand that you respect their privacy but want to make sure they're safe.

Here are some helpful hints to share with connected kids:

- **Be nice.** Mean behavior is just as unacceptable in the virtual world as it is in the real world. Make it clear that you expect your kids to treat others with respect and courtesy, and to never post hurtful or embarrassing messages about others. And ask them to always tell you about any harassing or bullying messages that others may post.
- **Think twice before hitting "enter."** Remind teens that what they post can be used against them. For example, letting the world know that you're off on vacation or posting your home address gives would-be robbers a chance to strike. Teens also should avoid posting specific locations of parties or events, as well as phone numbers.
- **Follow the "WWGS?" (What Would Grandma Say?) rule.** Teach kids that "once it's out there, you can't get it back." They shouldn't share anything on social media that they wouldn't want their teachers, college admissions officers, future bosses — and yes, grandma — to see.
- **Use privacy settings.** Privacy settings are important, and to highlight their importance, go through the settings together to make sure your kids understand each one. Also, explain that passwords are there to protect them against things like identity theft and should never be shared with anyone (even a boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend).
- **Don't "friend" strangers.** "If you don't know them, don't friend them." This is a plain, simple — and safe — rule of thumb.

Make It Official

So, how can you drive these messages home? One way is to make a "social media agreement" with your kids — a real contract they can sign. In it, they can agree to protect their own privacy, consider their reputation, and not give out personal information. Furthermore, they promise to never use technology to hurt anyone else (through bullying or gossip).

In turn, parents agree to respect teens' privacy while making an effort to be part of the social media world (this means you can "friend" and observe them, but don't post embarrassing comments or rants about messy rooms).

Parents also can help keep kids grounded in the real world by putting limits on media use. Keep computers in public areas in the house, avoid laptops and smartphones in bedrooms, and set some rules on the use of technology (such as no cellphones at the dinner table).

And don't forget: Setting a good example through your own virtual behavior can go a long way toward helping your kids use social media safely.

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