

Social media: What parents should know



Children and teens are creating and sharing information more than ever using digital media such as cell phones, smart phones, and computers. They send text messages, use Facebook and Twitter, write blogs, share photos and video to stay in touch with friends and family and to make new friends.

Social media offers lots of opportunity to help your child and teen be creative and stay connected and informed. But it's important to learn about the different technologies and how your children use them so you can help keep them safe online.

The social media landscape changes quickly. Because this document is only an introduction, we've included links to other websites you might find helpful.

What is social media?

Social media refers to the online tools that connect people with common interests on the Internet. Unlike traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers and so on), social media allow users to interact with each other. Popular social networking websites include [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Flickr](#), and [MySpace](#).

There are many different ways that people use social media:

- **Online profiles:** Most social media sites require users to set up a profile. A profile usually includes a name, e-mail address, birth date, interests and a photo.
- **Friends:** Depending on the kind of social media, users “follow” or “request friends” from people they know such as classmates or family. They may also use social media sites to find and meet new friends.
- **Messaging:** Sending short text messages over the Internet, using instant messaging and between cell phones.
- **Walls and boards:** Social media sites allow people to post or send messages in many different ways. On Facebook, for example, information is posted to a “wall”. Some messages are visible to a wider audience, while others can be sent privately like e-mail.
- **Photo and video sharing:** Social networking sites allow users to upload personal photos and videos. Some sites, such as Flickr for photos and YouTube for videos, are used solely to share images.
- **Blogs:** A blog is a website kept by an individual who updates it with regular entries of text or photos and videos. It is a lot like a journal, only on the web. People who read blogs can comment and share published content among their own online networks.
- **Joining groups:** Many kinds of social media allow users to create groups. People join, “like” or follow these groups to get access to information and have conversations with other members.
- **To play games:** Children and teens visit online sites to play games, alone or with their friends. Some, like Facebook, include free online gambling applications.

How can I keep my children safe using social media?

- Learn about the technologies your children and teens are using.
- Ask how they communicate with friends online. Tell them that you are willing and interested to learn about it.
- Keep computers in common areas where you can watch while your children use them. Be clear about the rules for using the computer and set limits on the amount of time and how they can be used.
- Set limits on cell and smart phone use. Talk about when it's a good time to use a cell phone. Your child or teen's school, for example, likely has rules about where and when they can or can't be used.
- Teach them the value of "unplugging" from devices and computers for technology free time. Reinforce that no e-mail or message is so important that it can't wait until the morning.
- Get online protection for your family. Programs that provide parental controls can block websites, enforce time limits, monitor the websites your child visits, and their online conversations. Tell your children and teens that you are monitoring their online activity. Be aware that some parent control programs will block information about puberty and sexuality that you might want your teen to look for.
- Ask your children and teens about the people they "meet" online. Showing genuine interest will help them feel comfortable talking about it. Explain that it's easy for someone on the Internet to pretend to be someone they are not.
- Discuss what's okay and safe to post online and what isn't.
- People can't always control the information others post about them. Explain that information and photos available online can turn up again years later.
- Ask your children and teens where else they access the Internet. Talk to teachers, caregivers and other parents about your rules for social media.
- Because people are not always who they pretend to be online, talk about the importance of keeping online friendships in the virtual world and how it can be dangerous to meet online friends face-to-face. Make it clear that if your child wants to meet a virtual friend in person, it must be with a trusted adult.
- If your child or teen is playing online games, join them (even if only to sit and watch) so you can see exactly what they are doing and talk to them about it.

What should I know about online privacy?

Social media websites have privacy policies and settings, but they are all different. Some sites are completely public, meaning that *anyone* can read or look at *anything*, *anytime*.

Other sites let you control who has access to your information.

Read a website's privacy policy before providing any personal information. Some social media websites, like Facebook for example, don't allow children under 13 to join their site. Check your child's privacy policy settings to make sure he isn't sharing more information than you want.

The following suggestions will help your children protect their online privacy:

- For some social media sites it is a good idea to choose an online nickname, instead of using a real name.
- Keep everything password protected, and change passwords often.
- Don't accept friend requests from people you don't know in real life.

- Think carefully about what you post online. Remember: things that are posted online stay online forever. As a general rule, don't post anything you wouldn't want a parent or teacher to see or read.
- Remember to protect a friend's privacy too. Ask permission before posting something about a friend, a photo or a video.
- Be aware of what your friends are posting about you.
- If you use a GPS-enabled smart phone or a digital camera, you could be posting status updates, photos and videos with geotags. Geotags provide the exact location of where your photo was taken. Make sure these are turned off on your device.

What is cyber-bullying?

Just as some people are bullied in real life, people are bullied online. It happens many ways: by sending mean messages by e-mail or posting them in an online forum or by sharing photos and videos without permission.

Talk to your children about cyber-bullying. If it isn't too serious, suggest that they ignore it at first. If it doesn't stop, is violent or sexually explicit or your child gets scared, encourage them to talk to you or another trusted adult.

The Media Awareness Network has some more information on cyber-bullying at:

www.bewebaware.ca.

What is sexting?

Sexting is used to describe sending sexually explicit messages, photos or videos between cell phones. It can also happen using e-mail or on social media websites.

- Ask your teen what she knows about sexting.
 - Talk about the dangers of sexting. Remind her that words and photos posted online can easily be shared among many different people.
 - Remind your teen that nothing is ever really deleted online. Friends, enemies, parents, teachers, coaches, strangers, and potential employers can find past postings.
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