Common Sense on Social Networking

It's all about hanging with friends — 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. 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.

Some facts

Sites like Facebook and MySpace have privacy controls.

Some sites require kids to be older than 13 to have a profile, but younger kids set up accounts anyway.

Social networks keep kids connected to friends and provide a space for self-expression.

There are no guarantees of privacy (even with settings) — anything can be cut, pasted, and sent.

Inappropriate pictures, posts, or messages can result in damage to a kid's reputation.

Kids can "tag" (or identify) their friends; this can violate their friends' privacy.

What are social networks?

Social networks are places where kids can hang out together online. These networks range from Club Penguin and Webkinz (for young kids) to MySpace and Facebook. The sites work pretty simply: people who sign up get a profile to post pictures, artwork, and links to songs; write about what they enjoy; and connect with friends. Social networks have become extensions of kids' social lives and wonderful places for self-expression. Social network sites are major communication hubs providing ways for kids to use instant messaging, "friend" one another, and "write on walls" to share public and private thoughts and comments. Social networks also have games, quizzes, and applications that let you do everything from give a virtual hug to buy a friend a virtual beer.

Why social networking matters

Young people today feel a lot of social pressure to use social networking sites. Connecting with friends, creating and sharing photos and videos, and playing games on these sites have all become important parts of kids' lives.

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.

Parent tips for young kids

» **Stick with age-appropriate sites.** For kids 5-8, there are sites with strong safety features that help kids play without risking inappropriate content or contact.

Parent tips for middle school kids

» **Facebook and MySpace won't let kids have sites if they are under 13. That said, kids simply do the math to figure out what year to put so they'll seem 13 — or older.** Check your computer browser histories. If you see either site, then assume your kids have an account.

» **Tell your kids to think before they post.** Remind them that everything can be seen by a vast, invisible audience (otherwise known as friends of friends of friends). Each family is different, but for middle school kids it's a good idea for parents to have access to their kids' pages, at least at first, to be sure that what is being posted is appropriate. Parents can help keep their children from doing something they will regret later.

» **Make sure they set their privacy settings.** Privacy settings aren't foolproof, but they're important. Take the time to learn how privacy settings work on your kids' favorite sites, and teach your kids how to control their privacy.

» **Remind them of the golden rule.** If your children wouldn't want someone saying it to them, they shouldn't say it to anyone else.

» **Kindness counts.** Lots of sites have anonymous applications like "bathroom wall" or "honesty boxes" that allow users to tell their friends what they think of them. Rule of thumb: If your children wouldn't say it to someone's face, they shouldn't post it.

» **Go online.** Get an account for yourself. See what kids can and can't do.

Parent tips for high school kids

» **Talk about the nature of their digital world.** Remind them that anyone can see what's on their pages — even if they think no one will. Potential employers and college admissions people often surf these sites. Ask your teens to think about who might see their pages and how they might interpret the posts or photos.

» **Set some rules for what is and isn't appropriate for your kids to communicate, play, and post online.** Posts with photos or comments about youthful misbehavior may come back to haunt them.

» **Let them know that anything they create or communicate can be cut, altered, pasted, and sent around.** Once they put something on their pages, it's out of their control and can be taken out of context and used to hurt your teens or someone else. This includes talk and photos of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Tell them that online stuff can last forever. If they wouldn't put something on the hallway in school, they shouldn't post it on their pages.

» **If they meet someone, it had 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. If your kids want to meet an online friend, let them know that you want to meet that friend, too.

» **Watch the clock.** Social network sites can be real time suckers. Hours and hours can go by — which isn't great for getting homework done.

© 2010 www.commonsense.org

Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit, is dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology.