

Kid-Safe Communities

Social Media – A Parent’s Guide

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, MeetUp, YouTube, Vimeo. Do these names sound familiar to you? These are examples of social networking sites. Such sites allow people to make new friends, send messages, share photos, etc. In recent times, these sites have become very popular among teens all over the world.

Can Social Networking Sites be Harmful?

Social networking sites are a great way to catch up with old friends and meet new interesting people. In fact, they also promote literacy skills, knowledge sharing, and social skills. But can they be dangerous? Here are a few recent cases related to social networking sites:

- Cases have been reported in the UK and US of sexual predators posing as teenagers and trying to solicit young children and teenagers.
- A mother was happy that her eleven-year-old daughter was using the computer often. However, she was horrified to see her daughter posting inappropriate photos on her profile on a popular social networking site.
- A teenager, was shocked when the police came to his house one day. An acquaintance from his college had filed a complaint. Apparently, someone had sent obscene messages to his acquaintance using his account and password.
- The daughter of a school teacher logged on to a social networking site. What she saw really hurt her. Few of her father’s students had created a forum on the site. Some of the posts used obscene language to describe him and his family.

As you can see, social networking sites can be potentially damaging if not properly handled. As a parent, how do you protect your child from untoward incidents?

What Your Child Needs to Know

You may not always be able to prevent your child from using these sites. However, it is necessary to educate him or her on the correct practices to follow while using these sites.

Privacy and Safety : Some social networking sites promote privacy while some allow anyone with Internet access to view personal pictures and profile information of other people. It is important that you recognize safe, good-quality sites where your child’s personal information cannot be misused.

Explain the possible risks of using a social networking site. Encourage your child to:

- Never reveal addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, passwords, or any bit of personal information. People with malicious intent can misuse such information to trace your child.
- Never add a stranger as a friend or share personal information with him. In the past, pedophiles have used social networking sites to target young unsuspecting children.
- Avoid meeting someone who is just an online contact in person. If your child is planning to meet someone he met online, ensure that it happens under your supervision, at least for the first few times. Find out more about the person’s background. Ask yourself, is he the same age as your child? What does he do?
- Never upload his picture unless he is sure that only his friends can view his photo and personal information. Posting one’s name, photos, and location makes it easy for someone to locate the person.
- Never click any links that come from strangers in messages or emails. More often, such links turn out to be promotions of websites, especially pornography. In rare cases, the link may be a virus or malicious program. Such programs can be used to track every website you visit, what text you type, etc.

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Netiquette: Just as in the real world, we need to maintain a basic set of manners in the online world. Here are some tips that you should share with your children:

- Never use abusive, sexually explicit, or inappropriate language in an online forum, email, message, or profile. Denigrating other religions, people, and races should be avoided.
- Never post inappropriate images that show nudity, personal information, blood, and violence in albums or as a profile picture.
- Never use social networking sites to spread rumors, chain mails, and unconfirmed stories that can potentially damage someone's life or career.
- Remember, what goes on social media stays on social media. Anything posted is saved by the social media provider, even if you've deleted it from your feed.

What You Can Do

- Any Internet-enabled device connects your child to not only potentially dangerous and illicit content, it connects them to a global network of people, some who have nefarious intent.
- Limit your child's use of social media and the Internet.
- Monitor their activities. Encourage your child to share profile link(s) with you. Remember, many children have multiple accounts on different social networking websites.
- "Friend" your child on social media so you can monitor what's happening in their feed.
- Encourage your child to speak openly about his experiences and problems.
- Install software that can control access to objectionable sites, especially if your child is below 13.
- Have open and honest dialogue with your children about the Internet and the sites they are visiting.

Social networking websites have their advantages and drawbacks. You may not always be able to protect your child from untoward incidents. What is important is to help him think critically for himself.