
Teaching Kids to Be Smart About Social Media

Most teens and many preteens use some form of social media and have a profile on a social networking site. Many visit these sites every day.

There are plenty of good things about social media — but also many risks and things kids and teens should avoid. They don't always make good choices when they post something to a site, and this can lead to problems.

To help them find the balance, it's important to talk with your kids about how to use social media wisely.

What's Good About Social Media

Social media can help kids:

- stay connected with friends and family
- volunteer or get involved with a campaign, nonprofit, or charity
- enhance their creativity by sharing ideas, music, and art
- meet and interact with others who share similar interests
- communicate with educators and fellow students
- access health information
- learn about current events

What's Bad About Social Media

The flipside is that social media can be a hub for potentially harmful or questionable activities.

Cyberbullying

Through **cyberbullying**, kids can be teased or harassed online. In fact, cyberbullying is considered the most common online risk for teens, and is linked to depression, loneliness, and even suicide in both the victims and the bullies.

Privacy & Safety

Kids also should know about privacy and safety. Without meaning to, they can share more online than they should. Many kids post photos of themselves online or use their real names on their profiles. They also might reveal their birthdates and interests, or post their school name and the town where they live.

Revealing this type of information can make them easy targets for online predators and others who might mean them harm. In fact, many kids say they have been contacted online by someone they didn't know in a way that made them feel scared or uncomfortable.

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 exactly where to find the person using the app.

Risks to Their Reputation

Photos, videos, and comments made online usually can't be taken back after they're sent or posted. Even when a kid thinks something has been deleted, it can be impossible to completely erase it from the Internet. Posting an inappropriate photo can damage a reputation and cause problems years later — such as when a potential employer or college admissions officer does a background check.

Mental Health Effects

Spending too much time on social media can have negative mental health effects. Sometimes it's not just how much time kids spend on social media, but how it's used that can affect their mood. For example, seeing how many "friends" others have and the pictures of them having fun can make kids feel bad about themselves or feel like they don't measure up to their peers. Also, kids who lurk passively in the background of a chat are often unhappier than those who actively post and send messages to friends.

Inappropriate Content

Kids may see online ads or content that are inappropriate for their age. This is especially true for kids who lie about their age to get access to certain social media sites.

Time Drain

Kids sometimes spend so much time on social media that they don't have enough hours in the day for doing homework, reading, exercising, sleeping, spending time with loved ones, or enjoying the outdoors.

What Can Parents Do?

It's important to be aware of what your kids do online. But snooping 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.

Tell your kids that it's important to:

- **Be nice.** Mean behavior is not OK. Make it clear that you expect your kids to treat others with respect, and to never post hurtful or embarrassing messages. And ask them to always tell you about any harassing or bullying messages that others post.
- **Think twice before hitting "enter."** Remind kids 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. Kids 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 not to 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. Go through them together to make sure your kids understand each one. Also, explain that passwords are there to protect them against things like identity theft. They should never share them 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. Let them know that kids who follow friends are generally happier than those who follow strangers.

Make a Contract

Consider making a "social media agreement" with your kids — a real contract they can sign. In it, they agree to protect their own privacy, consider their reputation, and not give out personal information. They also promise not to use technology to hurt anyone else through bullying or gossip.

In turn, parents agree to respect their kids' privacy while making an effort to be part of the social media world. This means you can "friend" or "follow" 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 devices at the dinner table). The AAP's family media plan tool lets parents create a media plan for their family. Make it something you all can agree on. Then post it in a visible area (like on the refrigerator) so that everyone knows the rules.

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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Date reviewed: August 2022

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