



Social Networking

Navigating Your Child's Online Social Circle

Social networking allows children and teens to express themselves and stay connected with each other. When used properly social networks allow children to share information and chat with friends. Unlike other areas of a child's life, though, online social networking is not something a parent can relate to. Today's parents didn't grow up with the technology available today, and need some guidance as they try to navigate the new social world of their children.

Social Networking Sites

Facebook is the most popular social networking site, although it isn't for young children. Users must be 14 or older to register. Unfortunately, Facebook has no controls in place to verify a user's age, and many young children lie about their age to set up a profile. Lying is an issue parents need to address, but there are other issues that may be more serious. Facebook's privacy controls are fairly complicated and most young children are not developmentally ready to understand them. Children may think their profile is private when, in reality, it isn't. If a profile isn't private anyone can see the child's profile just by clicking on their name.

There are several online communities designed for younger children. Club Penguin is the most popular, but newly launched Togetherville is receiving a lot of attention. Unlike Club Penguin which relies on children's use of cartoon penguin avatars to protect the child's anonymity, Togetherville requires parents to set up the accounts with their child's picture and real name. The site also encourages children to include their parents and other trusted adults in their network.

What Can Parents Do?

- Learn about social networking. Sites designed for young children have parent pages. Facebook and My Space have "Help" pages. Read them.
- Set up a Facebook profile for yourself and learn how it can be used.
- Help your child set up their account and set their privacy settings.
- Be aware of what your children are doing on the site. Sit with your younger children and learn to use the site together. Have access to your older child's account so you can review their posts and know who their friends are.
- Maintain an open dialogue with your children. Explain that anything they post online is permanent and can affect their future.
- Set rules about appropriate online behavior. Children should understand that if a comment would be hurtful to someone's face, it is hurtful online.

Useful Websites:

www.onguardonline.gov/topics/social-networking-sites.aspx

www.wiredsafety.org

www.protectkids.com/parentsafety/socialnetworking.htm

To learn more about Facebook:

www.facebook.com/help/?section=using

Learn more about Club Penguin:

www.clubpenguin.com/parents/

To learn more about Togetherville:

<http://togetherville.com/about>

For a list of social networking sites for children ages 8-13:

www.common sense media.org/website-lists/social-networking-kids

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