Tips for Parents

Who's that Girl? Image and Social Media / Girl Scout Research Institute

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become popular Internet forums for teens to socialize and connect with friends. These sites allow teens to chat, gossip, share photos and videos, and chronicle their daily thoughts and activities. While social networking offers benefits of increased communication and connection, unique risks exist for many adolescents. Here are some guidelines for you parents, to ensure your children are networking in a safe and age-appropriate manner.

Tip #1: Don't be afraid of social networking sites! Educate yourself and become comfortable using them.

Don't panic! You don't need to be a social networking expert, but it is important not to be intimidated by the technology and understand the basics of how social networking sites operate. For instance, do you know what Facebook is? Do you have an account? Do you have basic familiarity with how it operates? It's also critical to familiarize yourself with the kinds of information people, especially your children, share with others and how privacy controls work. When you don't understand social networking, your child has plenty of freedom to push the limits with her social networking profile and sheer curiosity. Don't let the generational difference inhibit your input on this topic! You need to understand that just as you know where your children go "physically" after school, you also need to know where they are going online. The more you're aware, the more you can monitor and discuss safety issues with your child.

As with anything, you should strive to strike a healthy—and, admittedly, sometimes elusive—balance between giving your children their privacy and room to grow as teenagers, and monitoring their activities. This is the same fine line you walk in their real lives, so it shouldn't be overly daunting in an online arena. Keep in mind, though, that that the stakes online can be higher, as teens are exploring their identities in front of a huge audience, including strangers, and likely experimenting with alternate and inauthentic personas. Adolescent identity development is challenging enough within the contexts of family, friends, and school; the Internet adds new risks.

Tip #2: Have highly specific conversations with your children about safe versus risky social networking.

Like with other adolescent behaviors, teens know the risks associated with social networking sites and want to do the right thing, but sometimes they don't act on their good intentions. The vast majority of teens (85%) say they've had a conversation with their parent(s) about social networking behavior, but half (50%) readily admit that they still aren't as careful as they should be. In addition, nearly six in ten teens think they have complete control over the content they post, a majority are "social networking friends" with someone they've never met in person, and a troubling number of teens have posted information about their school, physical location, and how they can be contacted. One in three has content viewable by total strangers, and while many teens express concern about the future consequences of what's shared on their profiles (e.g., with regard to getting a job or into the college of their choice), they continue to post potentially compromising content. Teens have good intentions when it comes to social networking, but having several

hundred "friends" makes it difficult to keep track of who these people actually are, and who's following their activity.

Given all of this information, it's clear how even the most well-intentioned parent-child discussions might be missing the mark. Sit down with your child and engage in a conversation about safe social networking behavior. Start with the basics: when does she visit social networking sites? What does she view? What does she think about what she views? Discuss the specific information she's posting. Ask: Is this information she would share in person with the next-door neighbor? Her teacher or coach? The friends she's posting it for? A stranger on the city bus? Why or why not? Question if she's friends with people she's never met. Why is this? Ask why she's making certain choices, rather than be accusatory or cast blame.

Having direct and open conversations about what constitutes safe social networking behavior can present opportunities to talk about a variety of topics related to social media. Ask your children if they represent themselves differently online than in person. Do they recognize how this makes them feel? Are they aware that others do the same? How do these "alternate online portrayals" affect their relationships?

Make sure to facilitate a two-way dialogue: often these conversations are richer and more fruitful. Previous research by the Girl Scout Research Institute shows that parents who engage and reach decisions *with* their children tend to observe less risky behavior than do parents who simply give in to their children's demands or force their children to do what they (the parents) think is best.

Tip #3: Help teens steer clear of gossiping/bullying in person and online.

Teen girls report that social networking can be somewhat fake: teens often paint different pictures of themselves online (fun, funny, social) than they do in person (nice, kind). However, despite these differences, girls are still authentically hurt by what transpires on social networking sites. As well, girls admit to behaving in ways online that they wouldn't necessarily in person. It's important to be aware of this disconnect in order to communicate effectively with teens about their experiences online. Educate your girls about the dangers of gossiping and bullying. Chances are your daughter has been on both the giving and receiving end of gossiping.

Another important thing a parent can do is model healthy relationship behavior whenever possible. Think about how you talk about and treat the people in your life, be they family, friends, coworkers—even strangers on the street. Do you gossip about other people? What are the words you use to describe people who have upset you? If you as a parent model respectful behavior, your children are more likely to follow suit.

Tip #4: Understand and optimize the benefits of social networking sites.

Ignoring social networking sites or adopting the attitude that they are only a negative influence may be counterproductive, especially when communicating with young people. Instead, understand that the majority of teens think that social networking helps them feel closer and more connected to their friends, and 52% have gotten involved in a cause they care about through a social networking site. Figure out ways to better understand what your child is doing on these sites (both the good and the bad) rather than dismiss or criticize their behavior outright. Take some time to understand the benefits and risks of social networking outlined at the end of this document.

Tip #5: Encourage striking a balance between social networking and face-to-face time.

It's important to understand that despite the fact that young people devote countless hours and may seem utterly addicted to social networking sites, they still prefer face-to-face communication. (If it came to this, 92% would give up all their social networking friends in order to keep their best friend.) This is great news for parents and adults alike, and parents should take time to actively encourage face-to-face get-togethers, since this can be easily lost in this wave of social networking. If teens know that social networking can tend towards "fake," face-to-face time can lend balance, grounding teens a bit.

And, remember—*parents have an important role in modeling healthy face-to-face social interactions and relationships*. In this age of increased technology, are you a parent that is only e-mailing colleagues and texting your child? While being tech-savvy is very important to maintaining awareness of your child's social behavior online, it is also important to encourage face-to-face communication. When talking with your child, do your best to set down your mobile device and steer clear of the computer. Ask your child to do the same. This sets the tone for a deeper, more authentic conversation and demonstrates that face-to-face communication is important in your family.

Tip #6: Promote self-confidence and healthy self-esteem with your children whenever possible.

Our study shows that girls with low self-esteem are more susceptible to negative experiences on social networking sites than are girls with high self-esteem. They are more likely to fall victim to hurtful behavior online and to engage in risky behavior. Interestingly, this is also the group less likely to have had a conversation with their parent(s) about safe social networking behavior. This in mind, it is more important than ever to foster confidence and self-esteem in your children.

Many girls, regardless their level of confidence, view social networking as a safe forum for "trying on" alternate versions of themselves. Girls may portray themselves in a different or more extreme way than they do in person. For example, girls with lower self-esteem who might be shyer or quieter at school might behave more boldly and even aggressively online—even though they are networking with a wider, more varied audience. And, though adolescent girls understand that they sometimes portray themselves differently online than in person, they don't necessarily have in mind that those they are interacting with are apt to be doing the same. Thus, they frequently become hurt by online statements and behavior that are read as authentic.

Building self-confidence and self-esteem does not happen overnight, but research shows that one way to accomplish this is through the development of skills and competencies. Helping your child develop social skills—on- and offline—is a great way to keep her safe and help develop her confidence in the social arena as well as in other environments. For instance, extracurricular activities encourage face-to-face time and will help teens grow into healthy adults who make informed decisions for themselves.

Girl Scouts of the USA understands that developing and maintaining healthy relationships are critical steps if girls are to become leaders in their own lives and in the world. Our national leadership program equips girls with skills to fuel healthy relationships in person and online, now and throughout their lives.

Summary of Risks and Benefits of Social Networking

Risks

1   *Social networking can be unsafe: privacy and safety issues.*
    • Ninety-two percent of girls are friends with someone they don't know well, if at all.
    • Fifty-four percent are friends with someone they have never met.
    • Thirty-one percent have profile content viewable by strangers.

2   *Gossiping/bullying is common.* Sixty-eight percent of girls have had a negative experience on a social networking site, such as being gossiped about.

3   *Girls often paint different/unreal pictures of themselves on social networking sites.* Sixty-four percent say that girls portray a different image of themselves on social networking sites than they do in person. (Goal is more about popularity—being fun, social—than promoting real, in-person attributes like being smart and kind.)

Benefits

1   *Social networking can enable closer relationships.* Fifty-six percent of girls say that social networking sites help them feel closer and more connected to their friends.

2   *Community involvement is encouraged.* Fifty-two percent of girls have gotten involved in a cause they care about through a social networking site.

3   *Pro-social behavior is endorsed.* Forty-one percent of girls have stood up for someone who was being threatened, harassed, or bullied on a social networking site.

4   *More honest communication is enabled via social networking sites.* Forty-eight percent of girls believe it's much easier to be honest with someone through a social networking site than in person.