

Social Networking Safety



Online social networks, such as Facebook and Myspace, continue to provide a popular forum for students to connect with one another and post personal profiles. While the long-term effects

of building virtual communities remain to be seen, chances are that your student and her peers are currently part of the growing trend of using virtual communities to build real relationships!

These sites can be wonderful tools for students to express themselves, learn more about others, and build technological skills, but it is important for them to keep in mind both the benefits and the risks inherent with use. As a parent, you can encourage your student to consider the potential costs associated with these convenient communities and help them stay safe as they utilize these resources.



How Parents Can Help Students Stay Safe Online

Reputation

People often forget that the Internet's pseudonym is the "World Wide Web." Almost anyone in the world can access information posted from a personal computer. While safety and security are important, so is one's reputation! In today's technological world, many of us are quick to casually write what we are thinking, without first stopping to think about how it

might be interpreted. Additionally, we tend to assume that the Internet is an anonymous forum for communication, when this isn't the reality.

Expressing oneself without limits can be tempting yet, encourage students to do so away from the Internet. It is not uncommon today for people – including potential employers – to do a web search to find out more about an individual. An offensive or inappropriate online journal entry or profile note will not be missed.

Ask students to consider the following questions before posting information online:

- Could I jeopardize my opportunity to obtain a leadership position on campus or in the community by posting this information in my online profile?
- Is it possible for future employers to see a photograph of me engaged in unethical, dangerous, or even illegal activities?
- Could I be held responsible for violating a campus policy if an administrator saw what I am about to post?
- Would I be proud to present my online journal entry or profile to members of my family?

Meeting On-line Friends in Person

It's quite possible that students may eventually want to meet an online friend in person. Gently remind students to take safety precautions in these circumstances, such as:

- Choosing a public place like a coffee shop or dining hall for the first meeting
 - Setting a time frame in which to meet, so a definite end time is pre-established
 - Making sure someone knows where she will be and making a plan to check-in with one another at an established time

Protecting Private Information

Online predators search for unsuspecting victims. One way they do this is by obtaining personal information from posted profiles and journals. Just because a profile asks for a piece of personal info doesn't mean it must be provided! Additionally, most online communities offer the option to make parts of a profile accessible only to friends, rather than the broader community, even though the default setting is usually "all public."

Remind your student to be smart and safe with these simple precautions.

Benefits of Cyber Communities

- Conveniently connect with others on campus
- Learn about other students who share similar interests
- Advertise events (such as birthday parties or club meetings) to a wide audience
- Coordinate academic initiatives and groups
- Communicate quickly and easily with friends
- Have fun meeting and interacting with people

Challenges of Cyber Communities

- People can be artificial/insincere about shared information
- Personal and private information is available to a large population of people, so misunderstandings happen
- Spending too much time online can interfere with school-work and other obligations
- Assumptions are made based on posted information