

Safety and Social Networking

Using MySpace and Facebook safely

The two most popular Social networking sites in the United States are Facebook (www.facebook.com) and MySpace (www.MySpace.com). Facebook currently claims more than 200 million active users. These sites allow users to set up web pages called profiles. The users can customize their profiles to show pictures, play music, include news feeds, and get updates from their friends on the site. They can join groups or networks of people who attended the same school, like the same celebrities, or attend the same churches. Most importantly, these sites give children and teens an opportunity for self-expression. Each user can customize his or her public profile.

What are the benefits?

Social networking sites let you keep up with friends and family. You can even reconnect with old friends with whom you may have lost touch.

What are the risks?

There are real risks associated with improper online behavior, but sometimes the risks to teens from social networks have been overblown. A 2009 report by the Crimes Against Children Research Center backs this up. One of their key findings was that there was no evidence that online predators were stalking or abducting unsuspecting victims based on information they posted at social networking sites.

Even so, just there are lots of ways for teens to get into trouble in the real world the same is true in the online world. A quick review of the website <http://www.MyCrimeSpace.com> will confirm this. MyCrimeSpace.com highlights crimes that involve social networking sites.

Safety Precautions

1. Use appropriate privacy settings

To access privacy settings on MySpace follow the steps below.

- a. Login to MySpace. On the main profile page click on My Account
- b. Click on Privacy
- c. Choose the options you want to determine who is allowed to see your profile, your comments, your friends, your photos, etc.
- d. These can be set so everyone can view, only users under or over 18, or friends only.

To access privacy settings on Facebook follow the steps below.

- a. Login to Facebook. On the main page click on Settings/Privacy Settings
- b. Click on Profile and indicate who you want to be able to see basic info, personal info, pictures, videos, etc. You can let everyone see these things, just friends, or friends of friends. You can also customize to exclude certain users.
- c. You can click on contact information and determine who gets to see your phone number, email address, current address, etc.



2. Never, ever, post anything online that you wouldn't want everyone to see. Once you have posted something online you have lost control over it. Never assume the privacy settings are perfect. Both MySpace and Facebook have had security breaches that allowed unauthorized users to see private photos and information.
3. You should have access to your child's profile page. Don't think of this like a diary. A diary that is kept locked up in a bedroom is very different from a webpage that is viewable by potentially anyone in the world with internet access. You should monitor communication on social networks just as you would monitor who they are hanging out with in real life.
4. Get your own account on the social networking site so you are familiar with the site. Parents and guardians cannot just stick their heads in the sand and give the excuse that they don't understand how these things work.
5. People are not always who they say they are online. I'm familiar with a case where an older male set up a profile page to look like a young female teen in the community. He then solicited inappropriate pictures from other males.
6. The most important thing is to maintain open communication and a trusting relationship with the child or teen. If the child or teen is intentionally trying to deceive the parent they may be successful. Teens have been known to setup one profile for the parents to see and a different profile that they use with their friends.

Resources

Crimes against Children Research Center <http://unh.edu/ccrc/>
Facebook <http://www.facebook.com>
Facebook on Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>
MySpace <http://www.myspace.com>
MySpace on Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myspace>
Parents Guide to Social Networking
<http://www2.state.id.us/AG/protecteens/ParentsGuideToSocialNetworking.pdf>

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