Teaching Kids to Be Smart About Social Media

(*By Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, MD from KidsHealth*)

Further recommended reading:

Book: [The Teen's Guide to Social Media and Mobile Devices: 21 Tips to Wise Posting in an Insecure World](#) by Jonathan McKee

Article: [Tips for Safe Social Networking for Teens](#) from connectsafely.org

Article: [Parent Guide to Protecting Teens on Social Media](#) from safesearchkids.com

Online Resource: [Privacy, Identity and Online Security for Parents of Teens from ftc.gov](#)

Most teens 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.

So 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

What's Bad About Social Media

The flipside is that social media can be a hub for things like [cyberbullying](#) and questionable activities. Without meaning to, kids can share more online than they should.

Most teens:

- post photos of themselves online or use their real names on their profiles
- reveal their birthdates and interests
- post their school name and the town where they live

This can make them easy targets for online predators and others who might mean them harm.

In fact, many teens say they have:

- been contacted online by someone they didn't know in a way that made them feel scared or uncomfortable
- received online advertising that was inappropriate for their age
- lied about their age to get access to websites

Concerns and Consequences

Besides problems like cyberbullying and online predators, 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.

And photos, videos, and comments made online usually can't be taken back once they're posted. Even when a teen 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. And sending a mean-spirited text, even as a joke, can be very hurtful to someone else and even taken as a threat.

Spending too much time on social media can be a downer too. Seeing how many "friends" others have and the pictures of them having fun can make kids feel bad about themselves or like they don't measure up to their peers.

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 teens 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. Teens 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.

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 teens' privacy while making an effort to be part of the social media world. This means you can "friend" and observe 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).

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.