MEDIA**WISE**®
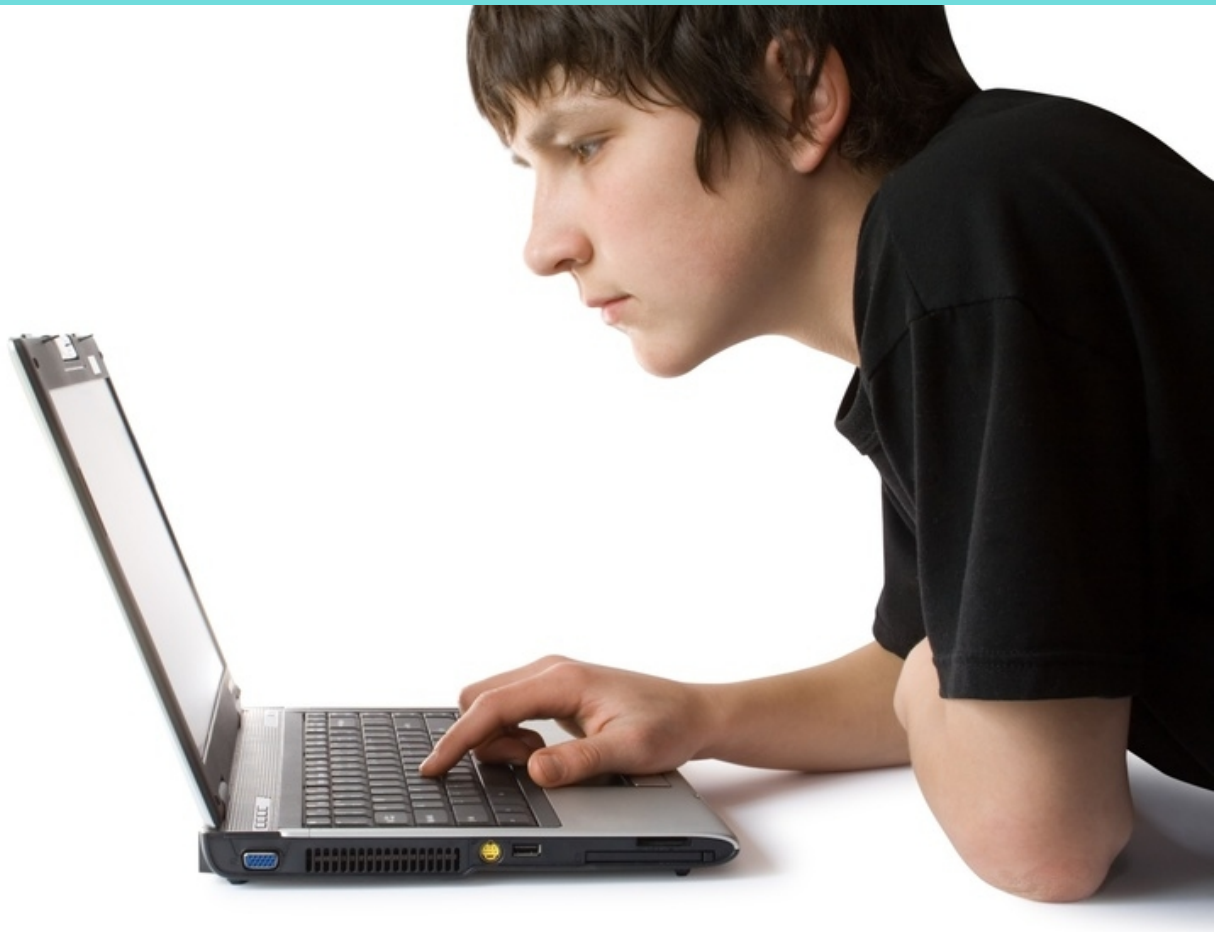# NETWORK

Guide to Social Networking: Risks

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON MEDIA + THE FAMILY

Hanging out online

Networked kids. Networked parents

Three years ago we released a MediaWise Network parent guide to MySpace.com when very few parents had even heard of the site. Now, just a few years later, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are part of the required parent lexicon. Not to mention the face that a growing number of parents are 'hanging out' online themselves.

What happened?

News stories about child predators, inappropriate content, and illegal behavior have elevated concern about social networking sites. Parties gone wild, cyberbullying, and internet sex have also made the radar. These issues are deeply concerning to parents and this guide will address ways to prevent these cyber pitfalls.

A world of risk and opportunity

However, the main reason parents are paying more attention to the role of the Internet in their kids lives is simple - it's where their kids hang out. Media-age youth are redefining what "staying connected with your kids" means - because for this wired generation, online friends, hangouts, and networks are no less real than 'real life.' And just like real life, online hangouts are full of both risk and opportunity. Read this guide to learn more.

In online social networking, kids create their own personal Web pages on sites like MySpace, Facebook and Friendster. On these sites, young people share personal profiles, pictures, videos, blogs, posts, and activities with online friends. Read this guide to learn about each of these features.

Profiles

Think of a profile as a quick online description of a person, usually including name, nickname, or username, personal information such as age, birthday and interests, and photographs or videos. Most profiles have a unique URL which can be visited directly. Profiles can have as much or as little personal information as desired.

What's hot

An online profile is a place for teens to present a snapshot of themselves - sharing their favorite activities, likes, dislikes, quotes and more with their friends. Teens have always wanted to experiment with their identity. Online profiles are just another place for teens to express themselves. This can be a fun way to make connections over shared interests and stay connected with friends.

What's not

It can be tempting to share too much in an online profile including identifying information like birthday, address, phone number, school, favorite hangouts and more. Sharing this type of information online leaves young people vulnerable to online predators and identity theft. Talk with your kids about how to make a safe online profile!

What's okay to include?	What should be avoided?
Name Favorite books, music, movies Interests Skills Birthday with no year	Incriminating or sexually inappropriate information Full birthday Address/phone number Schedule

Friends

For most youth, connecting with friends online is the whole point of social networking. Think of it as the media generation's version of the local park or café. If your child approves a friend request or vice versa, he or she is added to each other's friend list and can see each other's profiles, look at pictures, share music, post messages to each other and more. Some kids choose to only approve a small group of friends while others seek to add as many friends as possible to their list.

What's hot

Online social networking can be a great way for teens to stay connected with friends or family that live far away. For many teens, online friends form the foundation of their support network and/or provide an outlet for connecting with others over special interests, talents, or activities. Help your child choose positive networks and groups to participate in online.

What's not

For many young people, friend lists become popularity contests where whoever has the most friends wins. This can mean hundreds of online friends, increasing the risk that predators can "sneak in" to your child's network. Cyberbullying is also a growing problem among online 'friends.' Talk to your child about who they hang out with online and appropriate conduct and respect. Ideally, your child should know most of the people in his or her friend group in real life too!

Walls, bulletins, and boards

Most social networking sites allow friends to post messages and notes on each other's social networking page. As opposed to private emailing, think of this space as a virtual bulletin board that all online friends can view. Whether it's called bulletin space (MySpace), wall or superwall (Facebook), or chatboard (Xanga), posting messages to friends is an essential part of social networking.

What's hot
Posting messages can be a great way to stay connected with friends, share thoughts, and reflect on experiences. On a lot of sites, you can also post virtual hugs, high fives, smiles, congratulations and more. These exchanges can be lots of fun with no harm done!

What's not
Many young people forget that the bulletin space is relatively public - meaning that all 'friends' can see it when they visit your profile. The bulletin space is not a place for private conversations, incriminating information, crude language, or disrespectful messages. Talk to your kids about appropriate conduct online and the difference between private and public online communication. Make sure your kids understand that cyberbullying is unacceptable.

What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying means pretty much what it sounds like. Cyberbullies are kids who act just like the bullies from past generations. They pick on other kids, trying to humiliate and intimidate them. Except cyberbullies do their damage via emails, instant messages, web posts, and cell phone text messages from a remote location.

On social networking sites, cyberbullies can do damage very quickly by posting messages for all friends to see. Lay serious ground rules about cyberbullying and stick to them!
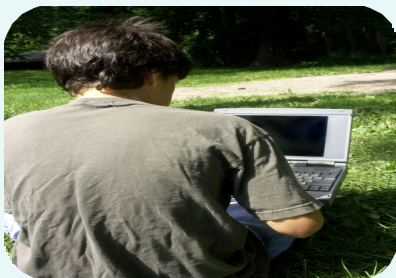
Weblogs, photoblogs, videoblogs

Kids have kept diaries and journals for generations. Young people have always needed a place to talk things through, process their feelings, and share their anxieties. This generation is no different, except that more and more kids are turning to the Internet to process and share their feelings. More and more youth are writing and publishing online blogs on topics ranging from personal reflection to political commentary.

What's hot

Online blogs are a feature of most social networking sites. Young people read their friend's blogs to see what's going on in their lives and publish their own using pictures, videos, and writing. A blog can be a great way for young people to share their experiences while on family vacations or on semesters abroad. It can also be a fun project to create a blog about a special interest, writing and commenting about politics, sports, or a hobby! Many teachers are starting to use blogs to engage kids in writing and reading.

What's not

Too many young people are sharing personal information with the world, putting incredible trust in their readers in ways that can lead to embarrassing or vulnerable situations. Teens need to be reminded that blogs are public even if online friends are the only ones who have access. Encourage your child to keep deeply personal information in a 'real life' journal that is truly private. Online blogs should be clean, professional, and access should be highly restricted.

Photos and videos

Videos aren't just for YouTube anymore. In this multimedia generation, young people are just as used to communicating with videos and photos as they are with words. All social networking sites allow you to upload personal photos, videos, voice blogs, and other multimedia creations.

What's hot
Instead of mailing cumbersome photo albums to family members and friends, young people can share pictures of their latest family vacation, new dog, or new home with their friends instantly. Many youth are also taking video editing projects to new levels, developing creative ideas and learning great new skills that they can share with family and friends.

What's not
Too often, the photos and videos kids post on their social networking sites contain sexually inappropriate imagery or incriminating behavior. Many young people are surprised to learn that college counselors and employers can peruse unrestricted social networking sites - sharing embarrassing behavior or poor decision-making skills can have real world consequences. Talk to your kids about appropriate pictures and videos and talk about restricting access to only close friends.

"Bumfights," punching games, and xtreme video

Teens have always wanted to push the envelope. Now, in a wired world, too many kids are pushing the envelope for the world to see. Last year a group of teenagers posted videos on YouTube of their fights with local homeless people, spurring outrage from parents everywhere. This year, Fox news reported another disturbing story - kids punching other kids in the head and posting videos of it online. While these videos aren't common, kids can easily get carried away. Talk to your kids about it!

Mobile networking

Soon all broadcast television stations will be going digital. This means that all of the lines separating various forms of media will start to disappear. Our television will be Internet compatible, our cell phones will access local media channels, and world radio will blast from our TV sets.

Of course we don't have to wait until June 12, 2009
- kids are already accessing their Facebook pages from their cell phones.

What's hot

For kids who don't have access to computers at home, cell phone access to social networking sites represents a way to stay connected with family and friends. Many parents also appreciate being able to stay in touch with their kids at all times.

What's not

Internet compatible cell phones often spell disaster for schools who are having a hard time managing student behavior in the classroom. Find out what your children's school policy is on cell phones and support it! Internet compatible cell phones also makes it easy for media time to get way out of balance. Think hard before enabling Internet access on your child's cell phone and be sure to talk about time limits and consequences.

Privacy and safety

Most social networking sites feature strong privacy settings that enable your child to restrict decide what information is "public," meaning that any MySpace or Facebook user can view his or her Web page, or restricted to approved users.

Privacy settings

Often the default settings are set to 'public' access. Make sure to visit the "privacy" link with your child to change the settings. Often, your child has a high degree of flexibility as to what elements of his or her site are public or private. The safest settings are to restrict access to all elements (pictures, photos, birthday, profile, online status etc...) to approved friends only. You child also has the option to block certain people from seeing his or her site and to pre-approve all comments posted on the site.

Internet tracking software

Internet tracking software packages allow parents to keep a better watch over all Internet activity, including social networking. Programs like Safe Eyes record activities on popular social networking sites for later review. These reports serve as great conversation starters about appropriate online activity. Many of these programs also alert you if personal information is shared online. Be sure to tell your child if you plan on using this type of software and don't use it to "spy" on your child. Instead, use these tools to check in every once in a while. The goal is not to "catch" your kids being inappropriate but to stay connected to their online world.

Nothing replaces adult involvement and involvement!

Privacy settings only work if your child uses safe judgement online. Limiting his or her friend list, using respectful language, not sharing personal information, and staying away from risky online activities is the first line of defense against unwanted online attention.

Other FREE MediaWise resources

MediaWise Guide to Social Networking: Rewards

You've learned about the risks. Now learn how online social networking represents opportunity for 21st century kids. Get it

See the network guide to advertising

Learn more about how and where kids are being targeted by advertisers and what you can do about it! Get it

Download the cell phone guide

Cell phones aren't what they used to be. Not only do they make calls, they also take pictures, play music, and stream TV shows! Download this guide to learn about new cell phone technologies and how this mini media machine can be a healthy part of kids' lives. Get it

Check out Say Yes to No - A community conversation from MediaWise

Minnesota *Say Yes to No* is a grassroots campaign igniting community conversations around raising healthy, self-reliant kids so they will be successful in school and life. Check it out today at www.sayyestono.org.

Tell your friends about the MediaWise Network

Connect with others, get access to FREE tools, resources, and ideas. Create positive change for your family and community!

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