

## Social networking

Social networking sites are an important part of most teenagers' social lives. You might worry about what your child is doing on the internet, but being part of the online world has its advantages, and you can help your child make the most of them.

### The basics

'Social networking' is using the internet to interact, form communities and build connections with people who share common interests.

Teenagers use social networking websites such as [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) to:

- create [online profiles](#)
- post comments, including [status updates](#)
- upload photos and videos
- send and receive messages
- have instant message chats.

They have their own pages on these networking sites, and can join groups made up of people with shared interests.

### What teenagers get from social networking sites

The biggest benefit teenagers get from social networking is a sense of connection and belonging to their friends and peers. It also gives them opportunities to develop and express their identities.

This is because teenagers use social networking sites to let friends know what they're doing and how they're feeling. Teenagers can also broaden their social groups by connecting to their friends' other friendship groups. Keeping in touch with friends and family across long distances and time zones is another bonus.

Then there's online chat, a central part of many teenagers' social lives. They use this feature to make social arrangements and talk about things that are important to them.

Overall, social networking sites are like an extension of face-to-face interactions, and work a lot like long telephone conversations with friends.



### did you know ?

- Social networking sites are used by 28% of Australians aged 12-14, and by 44% of those aged 15-17.
- Chat rooms and instant messaging are used by 44% of Australians aged 12-14, and by 48% of teenagers aged 15-17.



Research shows that when teenagers get positive feedback on social networking sites, it boosts their self-esteem – but when they get negative feedback, it lowers their self-esteem.

### Safe and responsible use of social networking sites

You can't keep up with everything your child is doing online everyday. But you can establish guidelines with your child about safe and responsible use of social networking sites.

You can also get to know the sites your child is using. Ask him to show you what sites are popular, or to explain to you what teenagers do online. Avoid directly asking to see his social networking page, because he might feel you're intruding.



Getting your own social networking page will help you get to know and understand the process of social networking, even if your child chooses not to be your online friend. You could show your child some of your friends' posts or ask her to show you how parts of the site work. You might also be interested to learn more about creating online content. All of this can pave the way to talking with your child about her social networking activities.

#### Responsible use

- Check that the social networking sites your child wants to use are appropriate for her age.
- Negotiate some guidelines with your child about when it's OK to use social networking sites – for example, you might both decide that the chat feature needs to be turned off when it's time to do homework.
- Negotiate with your child about what's an appropriate amount of time to spend online. Software programs that can limit the amount of time spent online might be useful for some families.

#### Privacy

- Your child will have a profile on each social networking site he uses. Talk with him about what personal information is OK to include in an online profile – for example, it's not a good idea for him to share his school, phone number or date of birth.
- Regularly check the privacy settings on social networking sites, then ask your child to update her page accordingly. Facebook occasionally changes its default privacy settings, sometimes revealing more private information than users had intended. Note that Facebook's default privacy setting allows everyone on the internet to see your child's photos, videos and status updates (not just the people who are friends with your child).
- Encourage your child to select the 'friends only' privacy setting on each section of his Facebook account (including selecting that option for each photo album he posts). This will stop your child's information from being publicly available.
- Your child should keep her passwords and log-in details private and secret from her friends. She should also make sure she logs out after using public computers, such as at a library.

#### Inappropriate content and comment

- Talk with your child about considering her reputation and those of her peers when uploading photos and making comments. As a general guideline, if your child wouldn't do or say something in front of a live audience, she shouldn't put it on her page. This also goes

for images, videos and information about friends.

- Your child should be aware of the consequences that might occur if he posts provocative or embarrassing photos of himself or others online. He might also like to think about what might happen if he poses for inappropriate photos in real life, such as at parties. Read our article on [sexting](#) for more information.
- It's important to be respectful when chatting or commenting online. It can be hard to 'read' emotion in written comments on social networking pages, and jokes can easily be misinterpreted. Encourage your child to be mindful of what she writes and how others might interpret it. Using [emoticons](#) like smiley faces can help others understand what she means. Just rereading what she has written before posting can help too.
- Keep in mind that anything your child uploads onto the web can be considered permanent – years from now, someone with the right skills could find information or images your child put up.

## Safety

- Encourage your child to only accept 'friend requests' if he's sure of the other person's identity – that is, if he knows the person really is who they say they are.
- Talk to your child about what to do if she wants to meet an online friend she doesn't know in real life. She should only meet the person in a safe public place, such as a café, with a parent or an older sibling present.
- Encourage your child to always report abuse – on most sites, this is as easy as clicking a 'report abuse' button – and to tell a trusted adult.

## Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can happen on social networking sites. It's when someone repeatedly uses the site's online chat, status updates or other functions to harass, humiliate, embarrass, torment, threaten, pick on or intimidate another person.

Talk your child through possible bullying scenarios – for example, if someone repeatedly says untrue or nasty things about him on Facebook, you could encourage your child to ignore the behaviour by not responding to the messages, block the person, report the abuse and tell someone he trusts.



For more information, read our article on [cyberbullying](#). You can also read more about [how to be a safe and responsible cybercitizen](#).

## If something goes wrong

Things can go wrong on social networking sites, such as someone posting an inappropriate photo of your child on Facebook or another site. Here's what to do.

- Stay calm and support your child.
- Focus on trying to remove the photo from the site. You can do this by selecting the 'report this photo' option displayed below photos on social networking sites. Note that although the photo might have been deleted from the site, that doesn't guarantee its removal from the internet, because it could have been uploaded to other websites.
- If the photo is offensive or indecent, contact your local police station. Note that the police might be able to act only if there is a criminal offence involved.

- Together with your child, go through the guidelines above about safe and responsible use of social networking sites.
- Aim for open communication with your child about online behaviour and experiences. If she has any future problems, you want her to feel able to come to you.
- If your child shows a sudden shift in behaviour, becomes very obsessive about using the internet (preferring it to being with friends) or seems depressed or down, talk with her and listen for what's wrong. If you're concerned, talk to your GP or other health professional.

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Rated ★★★★★ (1 ratings)

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## GLOSSARY

### Facebook

A website that allows users to build an online profile with personal details, photos, videos and other information. Users can add friends, send them messages, and let friends know what they are doing via 'status updates'. Users can also comment on their friends' status updates, photos and videos. These activities are called social networking.

### MySpace

A website that allows users to create an online profile with information about themselves, their interests and their moods. Users can upload music, photos, videos and blogs. They can receive comments from other users. Myspace has a group feature, which allows users with common interests to share a page. Activities like these are called social networking.

### online profile

Created by a user on a social networking site, such as facebook. It contains information about the user, such as their location and interests. Profiles often also include pictures and lists of contacts, and can have a section dedicated to comments from friends and other users.

### status updates

Short online statements that are written on a user's profile page on a social networking site, such as facebook. The user's friends or connections can view and comment on this update. A status update example is 'Mel Smith is counting down to the school holidays.'

### emoticon

A text-based picture or icon representing an emotion. For example, the emoticon :) means happy. People often use emoticons when writing emails or text messages.

#### More to explore

- ▶ Social and emotional changes in adolescence
- ▶ Teenagers and mobile phones
- ▶ Staying connected: you and your teenager
- ▶ Tricky conversations

#### Web links

- ▶ Cybersmart Parents – Social networking
- ▶ Cybersmart – Teens

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