

## **SOCIAL NETWORKING & RESPECTING PRIVACY**

A generation ago, parents were asked, "Do you know where your kids are?" Today, the question is, "Do you know who your kids are chatting with?" The popularity and "norm" of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, make it more important than ever to be involved in your children's social lives. Teens use these sites as a primary form of communication with their friends and as a way to find new ones, making it more difficult for parents to keep up with what they're doing and who they're sharing personal information with.

While their ease of use — many mobile phones offer Facebook applications — make the sites popular, they actually are tricky territory. In a recent study conducted at Queens University of Charlotte, an undergraduate researcher discovered the vast majority of college students willingly share personal information on Facebook to seek attention and support from their online peers.

Young minds don't always anticipate the inherent dangers involved with making much of one's personal life public, such as when what's meant as an inside joke between friends becomes damaging credibility when a college admissions counselor checks out a profile. And with ever-changing privacy policies, these sites aren't as secure as they might seem to the casual user.

Here are some important tips to help parents keep their teens safe on social networking sites and foster online responsibility before sending them off to college.

Get online and go where they go. Ask teens which sites they participate in and familiarize yourself with how these sites work. It might require signing up, but you don't really have to put anything on your profile.

Monitor what's being posted. Tell teens they should expect to be asked to see what is on their pages occasionally. Demanding they add you as a friend so you can meddle in their lives can backfire. When parents post on their children's pages, they inadvertently can disrupt social engagement between them and their friends, and soon find that the kids have moved on to other, more covert methods to communicate. Asking to peek over their shoulders at random times, without notice, feels less intrusive to them. And, it actually can provide a more accurate view of what they're sharing and what's posted by others on their pages.

Discuss privacy settings. Encourage teens to keep up with social networking sites' constantly changing privacy settings and rules of use. It's the only way to maintain control over who can see what's posted, and that's important, because once something is up it's in the public domain — even if they set that post to "private." Even the strictest privacy controls are susceptible to hacking. ]

Warn them posting personal photos is dangerous. Photos can be copied, altered and posted elsewhere without their consent or warning by other users.

Keep an eye on "friends" lists. Remember: People on these lists may be friends of friends, and not people teens actually have met. If the names seem unfamiliar, ask teens who they are and what their connection is.

Remind them the Internet is fair game. Tell teens to only post what they are comfortable with the whole world knowing. A clue in determining what is appropriate for posting or not is the answer to, "Would I want my parents or a future employer to see this or know this about me?" Know too that college admissions counselors now have people who search social networking sites for anything that may be potentially troubling before offering admission to college.

Teach them the laws and potential risks. Let them know posting pictures that may contain even slightly graphic content potentially could be seen as pornographic, and the owner therefore is held liable for posting illicit content on the Internet.

Forbid posts of location and personal information. Remind teens "stranger danger" is very real and that they should be suspicious of people they and their friends don't know who suddenly appear interested in communicating or ask for personal information. Teens never should post where they are going and at what time, as well as that they are leaving their house or college dorm room empty (and susceptible to burglary).