

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Communicating With **TEEN** *Your* Social Networking & Cyberbullying



If you are a parent of a teen, you know teens are very comfortable with, and often prefer, using electronic forms of communication. Teens of today will more likely text you than call you. They would rather communicate with friends via a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace than send an “old-fashioned” e-mail. Teens are into instant messaging, blogging, and sharing photos and videos online.

Online social networking provides a way for teens to connect with friends, as well as to express themselves and explore their interests. Most teens will tell you that time online does not take away from time they spend with friends; however, some research shows that electronic connections may be reducing teens’ interest in communicating with their friends face to face.

This trend may produce long-term consequences for teens, especially in their relationships with others, such as family members and coworkers.

Experts at one time believed that talking with others online was taking away from teens’ “real” friendships, but experts have discovered that social networking sites such as Facebook and the ability to instant message have actually increased teens’ communication with their real friends. These more recent methods of communicating online encourage youth to connect with existing friends, and new studies show that most teens are communicating online with current friends, not strangers.

But the tone of the online conversations matters. While more teens are using networking sites to connect with their friends, the type of feedback

teens receive about themselves online can be good or bad. When the feedback is positive, teens feel better about themselves, but when the feedback is negative, this can harm their well-being and self-esteem. Many of the hurtful things said online or electronically would not be said face to face because people are typically more polite in person.

The challenge for parents and other caring adults is to keep teens safe, both physically and emotionally. We want teens to use online social networking as a way to maintain healthy, meaningful connections with others. Although instant messaging and social networking sites are great ways for teens to stay in touch with friends and extended family members, especially those who live far away, online communication can compete with in-person

communication and can also be a powerful way for teens to bully other teens. Parents need to take an active role in monitoring their teens' social networking and other electronic communication and should talk with their teens about being online.

How can parents learn more about online social networking?

The best way to understand social networking sites is to talk with your teen and other young people about the sites because they are the online experts! Another way is to set up your own account on a social networking site so that you can explore directly what it's all about. Did you know that about 47 percent of adults aged 35 to 44 and 41 percent of adults aged 45 to 54 had a Facebook or MySpace account in 2009? In addition, 28 percent of all current Facebook users are 35 to 54 years old. Among teens, more than 70 percent had a profile on a social networking site in 2007, up 10 percent from the previous year.

Ways parents can make a difference

In addition to finding out whether your teen participates in online social networking sites and learning about the sites, you can do the following:

- Find out whether your teen has a page or profile on a social networking site. If so, log on with your teen to see what has been posted on his or her page.
- Talk with your teen about reasons to limit the personal information they post online and why it is important not to post things that could cause problems, such as inappropriate pictures or statements about themselves. Posting things to "look cool"

might make important people, such as teachers or future employers, view your teen negatively.

- Remind your teen that once something has been posted, it is in cyberspace forever, and they cannot control what others decide to do with that information. Suggest changes your teen could make to reduce any potential problems with his or her profile.

- Read the privacy guidelines and the age requirements for the site to make sure your teen is following these guidelines and meets the requirements.

- Allow your teen to express his or her interests on the social networking site and to share experiences that are okay to make public, such as the sports teams they play on or the great movies they have seen.

- Tell your teen it is never okay to meet in person someone whom he or she has met on the Internet. If you do decide to make an exception to allow your teen to meet an online connection in person, have your teen go with you or another adult you respect, and be sure to meet the new person in a public place.

- Use tools that permit you to filter online material and block sites you do not want your teen using. These tools are especially helpful if you have a younger teen. Use the Parental Controls on your computer. If you do not know how, ask someone who is good with computers to help you.

- Set a family Internet use policy that can be revised as your teen matures. Have rules that address when the Internet can be used, which sites can be accessed, and how much time can be spent communicating with peers.

- Encourage your teen to talk with you if something disturbing occurs when he or she is online, such as cyberbullying or sexual communication. Help your teen feel safe and supported by listening to what happened. Do not interrupt or overreact, as this can cut off important communication you need to have with your teen.

- Encourage a balance of face-to-face activities and online connecting with friends and family.



The following are some of the positive outcomes of using online social networking:

- Keeping family and friends up to date on your life and finding out what is happening in their lives
- Sending messages of encouragement to family and friends
- Reconnecting with old friends
- Keeping track of upcoming social events with your friends and family
- Creating awareness of causes that matter to you
- Working on group projects for school

Many young teens are online, and younger teens in particular need parental monitoring and input about their social networking. Make sure you thoroughly go through all of your privacy options on each site. There are ways to set it up so that only your friends, or even only certain friends, can see your information on Facebook. Some options may be set to a default, however, that might make information public without your realizing this. Remember, too, that once you share something private with someone else, they can still make it public.

Parents need to take an active role in monitoring their teens' social networking.



Cyberbullying

As children grow up and go off to school, many parents begin to think about ways to help their kids if they are ever bullied or teased. Some parents suggest that their child stand up to the bully; others say it's best to inform a teacher. But what if the bully doesn't pick fights on the playground or school bus? What if the attack comes in the form of cyberbullying through text messages or on Facebook?

Cyberbullying is defined as threatening, lying about, stalking, or harassing a person online or through other electronic communication devices such as a cell phone and includes the following:

- Sending harassing messages
- Posting private or "faked" pictures of another person
- Impersonating someone else online and gaining trust
- Posting someone else's personal information
- Posting false or cruel information about another person
- Using the Internet to encourage others to bully someone
- Breaking into someone's e-mail or instant message account to send cruel or untrue messages while posing as that person

Did you know?

- Many experts think that cyberbullying occurs more often than does bullying someone in person.
- Twenty-five percent of teens report being victims of cyberbullying.
- It is fairly easy to impersonate another person online, gain someone's trust, and then turn on them.
- Teens often trust others online because they want to be popular and have others think they are cool.
- Only 30 percent of kids who know about cyberbullying said they would report it to a parent or other adult.

One *New York Times* article reported on how nasty online bullying has become. It told of a small group of students who created a fake Facebook profile for one of their male classmates. (We will call him Jim.) They put Jim's name and pictures on the fake profile so that it really looked as if Jim had created the page. Next, from the fake profile, they began harassing other students so that it looked as if Jim were picking on them. They wrote comments to other kids, supposedly from Jim, such as, "you are such a pedophile," "you smell weird," and "at least I don't take pictures of myself in the mirror like a homosexual midget." At school, other students got angry with Jim and

asked him why he was picking fights on Facebook. Jim tried to explain that it wasn't really him sending the messages, but others did not believe him. Eventually, Jim began skipping school, eating lunch alone, and insisting that he was sick so he could stay home.

Because a lot of cyberbullying takes place at home when a teen is on the computer, it is important that parents know about cyberbullying and that they get involved in preventing it. Just as parents help their children avoid inappropriate websites, they can help protect them from cyberbullying.

Some of the things parents can do to help stop cyberbullying are as follows.

- Keep your home computer in a busy area of your house so you can see what is going on.
- Help your children set up their online profiles.
- Know your children's screen names and passwords, and make sure they do not include any personal information in their profiles.
- Regularly check their instant messenger buddy list or Facebook friends list with them. Ask who each person is and how your child knows that person.
- Discuss cyberbullying with your children, and ask if they have or if someone they know has ever experienced it. Tell

your children that you will not blame them if they are a victim of cyberbullying. The main reason young people don't tell adults when they are cyberbullied is because they are afraid their computer privileges will be taken away, so do not threaten to do so.

- Always let your children know that you are willing to talk to them about anything.
- Be aware of signs of online bullying, such as not wanting to go to school or getting upset while online.
- Know the codes or acronyms that kids use when they message, chat, or text. Some examples include the following:

LOL - Laugh out loud
POS - Parent over shoulder
LMAO - Laughing my ass off
OMG - Oh my God
A/S/L - Age, sex, location
CD9 - Code 9,
(means parents are around)
W/E - Whatever
GNOC - Get naked on
cam (webcam)
NMU - Not much, you?

Although some of the language and themes in these codes are distasteful, it is important that parents know the codes and what they mean. Use discretion if you read over these items with your teens or children.

25 % of teens report being victims of cyberbullying

Quiz Yourself

1. If your teen has been a victim of cyber bullying, which of the following would be MOST effective for helping him or her?
 - a. Assuring your teen that you will discover who has done this and will make sure it does not happen again
 - b. Suggesting your teen take a break from the phone or computer for a while
 - c. Talking with your teen about how the bullying made him or her feel, and telling your teen that computer privileges will not be taken away because he or she was bullied
 - d. Contacting your teen's teacher so the teacher can discipline the bully
2. You and your teen are talking about what teens do online. Which of the following is okay for teens to do?
 - a. Report publicly on Facebook or MySpace about personal interests such as books they like, games they play, or sports they watch.
 - b. Meet someone in person that they have met online.
 - c. Post pictures of themselves with people who are smoking or drinking as long as they were not participating.
 - d. Forward crude e-mails or inappropriate pictures as long as they did not send the original.
3. Your teen is always on the computer and cell phone, even during times when the family is doing activities together. How do you handle this situation?
 - a. Take away your teen's phone and computer for a month.
 - b. Ground your teen the next time she does not comply with your request to stop his behavior.
 - c. Ignore it. All teens are constantly online or on their cell phones—it is the way this generation stays connected.
 - d. Discuss your concerns about having a balance between online and in-person time. Set limits on computer and phone use.
4. You find porn on your teen's computer. What do you do?
 - a. Talk with your teen to find out how he came across the porn site, and discuss your concerns about online porn.
 - b. Take away your teen's computer privileges.
 - c. Require that the computer be used in a public place, and increase monitoring of your teen's computer use. Add parental controls so porn sites cannot be accessed.
 - d. Wait to see if it was a one-time thing. Occasionally spot-check your child's computer to see if porn is still being viewed.



Answer Key (the best responses are in red):

1. If your teen has been a victim of cyberbullying, which of the following would be MOST effective for helping him or her?

- a. Assuring your teen that you will find out who did it may scare your teen. Your teen may think you are going to threaten someone you think is guilty or create more drama for your child at school. This choice could embarrass your child, and your child may not speak to you about future problems.
- b. Telling your child to take a break from the computer may suggest that the bullying would not have happened if your child had not been online. Remember, one of the main reasons teens do not tell their parents about being bullied online is because they are afraid parents will take away their privileges.
- c. Talking with your teen openly and honestly about his or her feelings about the bullying is the best choice. This will let your teen share his or her point of view and assure him or her of your support.**
- d. Shifting the responsibility to the teacher is not the best solution. Teachers often point out that what happens online at home or on a cell phone is not their responsibility. Also, your teen may not want the teacher to know because it may be embarrassing. Telling the teacher also may make it less likely your teen will come to you with future problems.



However, if children at your child's school are doing the bullying and the bullying continues or seems to be getting worse, it will be important to talk with the school counselor and principal about what is occurring so they can take steps at the school level to address the issues of bullying and cyberbullying. Talk with your child first about what you plan to do so he or she can be prepared for what happens after the school is notified.

2. You and your teen are talking about what teens do online. Which of the following is okay for teens to do?

- a. It generally is okay for teens to report about their general interests on Facebook or MySpace. This is one way that teens connect to others in appropriate ways.**
- b. Teens should never meet someone in person that they have met online unless they are accompanied by a responsible adult.
- c. Teens should not post pictures of themselves with people who are smoking or drinking, even if they are not involved. Remember that what is posted online is in cyberspace forever. Pictures such as those mentioned might be viewed by someone that the teen really did not want to see them (like a pastor, a grandparent, or even a future employer). You never know who will look at your pictures once they are online!
- d. Your teen should not forward crude e-mails or unsuitable pictures because the person receiving the e-mail or picture may think that it originated from your teen. The person receiving the material may also think poorly of someone who would forward something unacceptable.

3. Your teen is always on the computer and cell phone, even during times when the family is doing activities together. How do you handle this situation?

- a. Taking away your teen's computer and cell phone may not be an effective solution, especially if you have not tried other solutions first. You want to teach your teen to use electronic devices responsibly and to balance time on the computer and phone with family time. For this to happen, your teen needs the opportunity to limit her computer and phone use and to learn how to make good decisions about spending quality time with family.
- b. Grounding works for some teens, but for many others it does not. It also does not teach your teen what it is you want your teen to learn to do—to use her computer and phone in a responsible way. Grounding your teen should only occur if you have tried other ways to encourage responsibility. It is your right as a parent to determine what privileges your child should have. If you have reasonable expectations and rules that are adjusted as your child gets older, your child is likely to stay within the boundaries.
- c. Ignoring your teen's disrespect for rules and parental requests is definitely not the answer if you want your teen to respect your authority. When a teen breaks the rules, discuss it with him or her, and determine the suitable consequence.
- d. **Discussing the importance of a balance between online and in-person time is the best strategy to use. Teens are engaged in many meaningful activities outside of the family (jobs, sports teams, time with friends). As teens get older, their time spent with family will decrease, but it should not disappear. It also is good to set sensible limits on computer and phone use, as well as reasonable expectations for how much time to spend with family.**

4. You find porn on your teen's computer. What do you do?

- a. **Talking with your teen to find out how he came across the porn site and discussing your concerns about online porn is the best approach. Find out if the porn site popped up while your teen was looking for something else on the computer because it is possible your teen did not seek out the site. If it turns out your teen was purposefully viewing online porn, it will be important to find out what led your teen to do this, how long it has been going on, and if others are talking with your teen about it. It will be especially important to make sure your teen has not been lured by online predators.**
- b. Taking away your teen's computer privileges should be done only if your child continues to view online porn after you have tried other strategies to address the issue. It also is possible your child will simply find other friends' computers on which to view the porn and will be sneakier about his activities.
- c. **Requiring that the computer be used in a public place and increased monitoring of your teen's computer use are good ideas, especially with younger teens. Adding parental controls so that porn sites cannot be accessed is also a good idea.**
- d. Waiting is not a good idea since your teen could be in trouble and may be involved with an online sexual predator. It is better to talk calmly with your teen right away to find out what is going on and get help if needed. Talking with your teen right away also communicates that you are the parent, setting the rules and helping to keep your teen safe. See <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide/parent-guide> for more information about how to protect your child from online porn and predators.

Once you post something, it is in cyberspace forever, even if you delete it.

Online Social Networking Tips for Teens

Be sure that your teens are aware of the following:

- What you post is not fully private. Even if you have privacy settings to limit who can see your page, someone you have given permission to view your page can make your private information public.
- Once you post something, it is in cyberspace forever, even if you delete it.
- You should never give anyone (except your parents) your online passwords.
- If someone sends a mean or threatening message, do not respond. Save the message or print it out and show it to an adult.
- Never send messages when you are angry. Before clicking Send, ask yourself how you would feel if you received the message.

Tell your teens that it is wise to avoid the following:

- Posting improper pictures of yourself or others
- Providing personal information (such as your address or phone number) due to the risk of identity theft or stalking
- Using social networking sites to hurt someone else
- Posting anything about yourself that may hurt you now or in the future. Many employers now look on social networking sites when considering whether to hire someone (or fire someone).
- Using social networking sites to create drama in your life (especially concerning your romantic relationships or friendships). You may later regret how embarrassed you and others feel about what was posted.
- Spending time on social networking sites instead of studying
- Using the Internet to find romance. Make it a rule never to meet online contacts in person. If for some reason you do decide to meet someone in person, always take someone with you (preferably your parent or a trusted adult), meet in a public place, and let others who care about you know where and when you are going to meet this person.

Glossary of Terms

- **Facebook or Myspace** Popular websites that allow people to communicate with each other and share pictures, videos, and other information about themselves or any subject they wish.
- **Online Profile** A private Internet page created by a teen that allows him or her to share information and pictures with friends and others.
- **Cyberspace** The Internet and online world in which online communication takes place.
- **Stalking** Being obsessed with someone and monitoring nearly every activity that person does.
- **Harassing** Intentionally trying to disturb or upset someone.
- **Instant Messaging** A text form of communication that happens in real time like a conversation between people over the Internet. When the message is typed and sent, the recipient receives it instantly.
- **Blogging** A type of website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or videos.

Helpful resources for parents

- www.ncpc.org/topics/cyberbullying/stop-cyberbullying
National Crime Prevention Council website with helpful tips for parents about how to help someone who is being bullied online
- familyinternet.about.com/od/computingsafetyprivacy/a/cyberbully.htm
A parent's guide to cyberbullying with answers to frequently asked questions
- www.cybertipline.com
A cyber tip line that allows parents to report online offenders to the proper authorities
- www.wiredsafety.org
An Internet guide to safe online practices with information about local parent gatherings and meetings designed to help prevent unacceptable online behavior

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