

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Face Book, My Space, and Twitter make it so easy to connect with friends. Not to mention IM, blogging, and texting. And who knows what the future will bring?

ConnectSafely.org is an online community that talks about “*smart socializing on and off the fixed and mobile Internet.*” Sounds fancy, but it’s really not. It’s just a matter of keeping your **personal privacy, safety** and **integrity** in mind when you use social media. Here are some of their tips for teens.*



Social Networking Tips for Teens

Be your own person. Don't let friends or strangers pressure you to be someone you aren't. And know your limits. You may be Net-savvy, but people and relationships change, and unexpected stuff can happen on the Internet.

Be nice online. Or at least treat people the way you'd want to be treated. People who are nasty and aggressive online are at greater risk of being bullied or harassed themselves. If someone's mean to you, try not to react, definitely don't retaliate, and talk to a trusted adult or a friend who can help. Use privacy tools to block the meanies.

Think about what you post. Sharing provocative photos or intimate details online, even in private emails, can cause you problems later on. Even people you consider friends can use this info against you, especially if they become ex-friends.

Passwords are private. Don't share your password even with friends. It's hard to imagine, but friendships change and you don't want to be impersonated by anyone. Pick a password you can remember but no one else can guess. One trick: Create a sentence like "I'll graduate from High School in 13" for the password "IgfHSi13."

Read between the "lines." It may be fun to check out new people for friendship or romance, but be aware that, while some people are nice, others act nice because they're trying to get something. Flattering or supportive messages may be more about manipulation than friendship or romance.

Don't talk about sex with strangers. Be cautious when communicating with people you don't know in person, especially if the conversation starts to be about sex or physical details. Don't lead them on - you don't want to be the target of a predator's grooming. If they persist, call your local police or contact CyberTipline.com.

Avoid in-person meetings. The only way someone can physically harm you is if you're both in the same location, so - to be 100% safe - don't meet them in person. If you really have to get together with someone you "met" online, don't go alone. Have the meeting in a public place, tell a parent or some other solid backup, and bring some friends along.

Be smart when using a cellphone. All the same tips apply with phones as with computers. Be careful who you give your number to and how you use GPS and other technologies that can pinpoint your physical location.

Cyberbullying Tips

Here are some tips if you or someone you know is being bullied - and advice for ending (or preventing) the cycle of aggression.

Don't respond. If someone bullies you, remember that your reaction is usually exactly what the bully wants. It gives him or her power over you. Who wants to empower a bully?

Don't retaliate. Getting back at the bully turns you into one and reinforces the bully's behavior. Help avoid a whole cycle of aggression.

Talk to a trusted adult. You deserve backup. It's always good to involve a parent but - if you can't - a school counselor usually knows how to help. Sometimes both are needed. If you're really nervous about saying something, see if there's a way to report the incident anonymously at school. Sometimes this can result in bullies getting the help they need to change their behavior.

Save the evidence. The only good news about digital bullying is that the harassing messages can usually be captured, saved, and shown to someone who can help. Save evidence even if it's minor stuff - in case things escalate.

Block the bully. If the harassment's coming in the form of instant messages, texts, or profile comments, do yourself a favor: Use preferences or privacy tools to block the person. If it's in chat, leave the "room."

Be civil. You're doing yourself a favor. Even if you don't like a person, it's a good idea to be decent and not sink to his or her level. Research shows that gossiping about and "trash talking" others increase your risk of being bullied.

Don't be a bully. You know the old saying about walking a mile in someone's shoes; even a few seconds of thinking about how another person might feel can put a big damper on aggression. That's needed in this world.

Be a friend, not a bystander. Forwarding mean messages or just standing by and doing nothing empowers bullies and hurts victims even more. If you can, tell bullies to stop, or let them know bullying is not cool - it's cruel abuse of fellow human beings. If you can't stop the bully, at least try to help the victim and report the behavior.

More information is available at www.haltabusektd.org and www.cyberbullying.org. See also BULLYING, page 7.

Sexting Tips

"Sexting" usually refers to teens sharing nude photos via cellphone, but it's happening on other devices and the Web too. The practice can have **serious legal and psychological consequences** for anyone (at any age), so consider these tips:

Sexting is illegal: Don't take or send nude or sexually suggestive photos of yourself or anyone else. If you do, even if they're of you or you pass along someone else's - you could be charged with producing or distributing child pornography. If you keep them on your phone or computer you could be charged with possession. If they go to someone in another state (and that happens really easily), it's a federal felony.



Non-legal consequences: Then there's the emotional (and reputation) damage that can come from having intimate photos of yourself go to a friend who can become an ex-friend and send it to everyone you know. Not only can they be sent around; they can be distributed and archived online for people to search for pretty much forever.

Not just on phones. Sexting can be done on any media-sharing device or technology - including email and the Web. **Teens have been convicted of child porn distribution for emailing sexually explicit photos to each other.**

Many causes. In some cases, kids are responding to peer pressure in a form of cyberbullying or pressure from a boyfriend or girlfriend (they break up, and sometimes those photos get sent around out of revenge). Sometimes it's impulsive behavior, flirting, or even blackmail. It's always a bad idea.

Remember: *With sexting, the same minor can be both perpetrator and victim when producing and sending photos of him or herself* - a very tricky situation under current laws. Here are some ideas about what to do if you find yourself in a sexting situation:

- ✓ If a sexting photo arrives on your phone, **First**, do not send it to anyone else (that could be considered distribution of child pornography). **Second:** Talk to a parent or trusted adult. Tell them the full story so they know how to support you. And don't freak out if that adult decides to talk with the parents of others involved - that could be the best way to keep **all of you** from getting into serious trouble.
- ✓ If the picture is from a friend or someone you know, then someone needs to talk to that friend so he or she knows sexting is against the law. You're actually doing the friend a big favor because of the serious trouble that can happen if the police get involved.
- ✓ If the photos keep coming, you and a parent might have to speak with your friend's parents, school authorities or the police.

For more information, see SEXUAL ASSAULT LAWS, page 26 and SEXUAL ASSAULT OR RAPE, page 51.

Cellphone Safety

Cellphones are increasingly full-blown handheld computers, and everything that can be done on the Web via computer - photo-sharing, Web browsing, game playing, tune-swapping, real-time text chat, and (oh yeah) talking - can be done on a phone. Here are some basic ideas for keeping mobile phone use safe and constructive:

Smart socializing. Use the same good sense about what you post from your phone as from a computer. Once they're posted, text, photos, and video are tough to take back, can be copied and pasted elsewhere, and are up there pretty much forever. Think about the people in them (including you!). Reputations are at stake - even more so if nudity or sex is involved.

Phones are personal. Letting other people use your phone when you're not around is like letting them have the password to your social network profile. They can impersonate you. Which means they can play tricks on you that could really become a problem. It's a good idea to lock your phone when you're not using it. It's not a good idea to let friends text for you while you're driving. Don't text while driving; just be safe and turn the phone off!

Bullying by phone. Because people socialize on cellphones as much as online, cyberbullying can be mobile too. Treat people on phones and the Web the way you would in person, and the risk of being bullied goes down. Be aware, too, of people randomly taking pictures at parties - you may not want to be tagged in their social-network photo albums.

Sexting: It's the same on phones as on the Web - do not take, send, post or even store on your phone nude photos of anyone under 18. You could be charged with production, distribution, or possession of child pornography, a serious crime. You could also be subjected to jokes, bullying, blackmail, expulsion from school, loss of a job, etc. and the images can circulate forever.

The value of "presence." If you do a lot of texting, consider the impact that being "elsewhere" might be having on the people around you. Your presence during meals, at parties, in the car, etc. is not only polite, it's a sign of respect and appreciated.

Down time is good. Constant texting and talking can affect sleep, concentration, school, and other things that deserve your thought and focus. You need your sleep and real friends understand there are times you just need to turn off the phone - harassment can happen between midnight and morning too.

Social mapping. Most cellphones now have GPS technology and there are a growing number of services that allow friends to pinpoint each other's physical location. If you use such a service, do so only with friends you know in person, and get to know the service's privacy features!

The Bottom Line:

It's smart to stay alert when using digital media. People aren't always who they seem to be, even in real life, and sometimes they change and do mean things. Critical thinking about what we upload as well as download is the best protection.

Additional information is available at:
<http://kids.getnetwise.org>, and www.connectsafely.org.

For more information about PERSONAL SAFETY, see page 39.

See also:
PEER PRESSURE, page 34
RELATIONSHIPS, page 44

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