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[Search >](#)

Technology

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Making Social Media Safe for Kids

No matter your age, you probably remember your parents wondering what you and your friends talked about for hours on the phone every day. Today, there's no end to the things our children can tweet, post, and share on social media, and we're lucky if they spend only an hour or two doing so.

Social networking sites are more than just avenues for idle chatter, however. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms offer opportunities to practice another language, trade photography tips, or make friends from cultures all over the world. Sure, there are opportunities for people to take advantage of one another, but savvy parents can employ the following simple strategies to prepare their children for a safe social media experience.

Explain Your Concerns

Social media sites are anything but private. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have default settings that allow the public to access your profile and postings, and the risks of having private details available to bullies, con artists, and predators can't be understated.

Instead of terrifying kids with worst-case scenarios, though, try to put the issue into a context that resonates for them. For instance, while it might not seem like a big deal to your child to post a comment about how bored they are in English class, their opinion is likely to change when they have an awkward run-in with that teacher at school.

Your child might also think it's cool to let everyone in the world know they're having a blast in Disneyland by posting a ton of pictures. To the wrong person, however, such posts—complete with location tags on the photos—show others your family is out of town and leave your empty home vulnerable to break-ins.

Agree on Ground Rules

Once you've made your kids aware of the kinds of problems that can arise from using social media, write out some basic rules the whole family can follow:

- Change privacy, posting, and tagging settings so only friends can see or make changes to posts—and make sure you're on your their "friends" list too. That's the easiest way to monitor what's happening on their pages, though you should also promise not to embarrass them online if you can help it.
- Don't include phone numbers or addresses in your profile or within individual posts on social media sites. Don't share passwords or other personal info, either.
- Don't accept friend requests from people you don't know.
- Think before you post. Even deleted content can be found by a savvy online searcher.
- Never agree to meet online friends somewhere off-line, and report any inappropriate emails, texts, or requests to a trusted adult.

Let the Tables Be Turned

Once you've educated your children about social media safety, it's your turn to learn a few things from them. It will not only make you more confident about keeping up with technology but also go a long way towards building mutual trust.

"Parents' biggest issue right now is their fear that they can't keep up; they think they need to be experts," says Josh Ochs, who runs the website, [Safe, Smart & Social](#). "Instead, ask your teen to teach you how to use different social media platforms. When kids feel like they're the experts, they let down a lot of their barriers."

And a family that can safely open up to one another is one that will watch each other's backs so they all can enjoy the benefits of social media without the risks.
