



Search Site

Search

Log in

RESOURCES PROGRAMS TRAINING & EVENTS NEWSROOM ABOUT US MCGRUFF STORE

You are here: Home Resources Internet Safety Parents' Guide to Social Networking Websites

By Audience ...

Resources

[Bullying](#)
[Cell Phone Safety](#)
[Conflict Resolution](#)
[Cyberbullying](#)
[Disaster Preparedness](#)
[Drug Abuse](#)
[Evaluation Reports](#)
[Fraud and Identity Theft](#)
[Gang Violence Prevention](#)
[Halloween Safety](#)
[Hate Crime](#)
[Home and Neighborhood Safety](#)
[Intellectual Property Theft](#)
[Internet Safety](#)
 [Tips for Parents](#)
 [Parents' Guide to Social Networking Websites](#)
 [Cybersafe Girls](#)
 [Internet Safety: Activities and Lesson Plans for Grades 4-5](#)
 [Social Networking Safety](#)
 [Mind What You Do Online: Protect Yourself Against Cybercrime](#)
[Mortgage Fraud](#)
[Safe Firearms Storage](#)
[Senior Safety](#)
[School Safety](#)
[Vacant Property Crime](#)
[Violent Crime and Personal Safety](#)
[Volunteering](#)
[Workplace Safety](#)
[By Audience](#)
[Reentry](#)

Parents' Guide to Social Networking Websites

You've probably heard the names - MySpace.com, Facebook.com, Xanga.com. These are some of the top ...

You've probably heard the names – MySpace.com, Facebook.com, Xanga.com. These are some of the top social networking websites, that have become an online craze for teens and for many adults. You've probably also heard some stories about how pedophiles are surfing these pages for their next targets, or how teens are having their identities stolen after posting too much information online. The good news is that young people can protect themselves and their personal information easily, if they know how.

Social networking websites may seem high-tech, especially to the non-tech savvy user, but they're easy to use and to understand. They differ from traditional websites in that they allow users to interact with them and with other users. Many of the popular social networking websites let users create personal profiles, add photos, write in a public journal or blog, send messages to others, and invite people to become their online friend – all with just a few clicks of the mouse.

None of this technology is inherently dangerous, and if it's safely used it can be a great creative outlet for young people and a way to get them excited about technology. However, many young people are sharing too much information online and aren't aware that anyone with an Internet connection can view it - even pedophiles, employers, teachers, their school nemesis, and you. As a parent, you can teach your children how to safely use social networking websites and make sure that they do. Below are some ways that you can protect your children and their personal information online.

Talk to your kids about the risks.

- Explain that online information and images can live forever. It can be very hard and sometimes impossible to take down information that is posted, and photos and information may already have been copied and posted elsewhere.
- Tell your children not to post any identifying information online. This includes their cell phone number, address, hometown, school name, and anything else that a stranger could use to locate them.
- Explain that anyone in the world can access what they post online. Tell your children that some college admissions boards and employers are checking social networking sites before they admit students or hire people.
- Remind your children never to give out their passwords to anyone but you – not even their friends. Explain that if someone has their password, they could post embarrassing and unsafe information about them on their personal pages and even pose as your children to talk to other people.
- Make sure that children understand that some people they meet online may not be who they say they are. Explain that on the Internet many people are not truthful about their identity and may even pretend to be someone else. It's important to stress that young people should never meet people face-to-face that they met online.

Protect them from dangers.

- Most social networking websites require that young people be at least 13-years old, and sometimes even 18, to create an account. Don't let younger children pretend to be older to use these websites.
- MySpace and some other social networking websites let users set their profiles to private so that only their friends – usually defined as people that know their full name or email address – can contact them. Make sure younger teens' profiles are set to private.
- Go online with your children and have them show you all of their personal profiles. Ask to see some of their friends' profiles too. If they have a blog or share photos online, ask to see them too.
- Treat your children's online activities like you do their offline ones. Ask questions about what they do, who their friends are, and if they have made any new friends.
- Set clear rules that you can all agree on regarding what your children are allowed to do online. Make sure you decide if your children are allowed to post photos of themselves and open accounts without your permission.

How you can help them.

- Have your children tell you if they ever see anything online that makes them uncomfortable. Make sure they understand that you won't blame them.
- Ask them to come to you if anything happens online that hurts or scares them. Tell them that you won't punish them by banning them from the Internet – this is a big reason why many kids don't talk to their parents about their online problems.
- Report any cases of possible child sexual exploitation, no matter how small, to the Cyber Tipline.

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