

Social Networking

Safety Tips for Parents and Carers

These safety messages are for parents, carers, children, young people and service providers. The safety tips draw on the available research, and issues discussed in the Home Office Task Force project group. The information in this section is intended to help provide material for any media literacy, education, awareness or campaign work that providers or others may wish to develop.

Safety Tips for Parents and Carers

Become familiar with social networking and user interactive sites

- You should not be afraid to become involved in your children's online activities. Most social networking and user interactive sites are easy to examine and evaluate, and children are best protected when they communicate with their parents or carers.
- Ask your child about what social networking and user interactive sites they use and how they work. This will help you understand your child's interests and enable you to assess how well they understand the issues associated with using the service.
- Depending on the age of your child, consider the use of parental controls such as filtering or monitoring software on which you can set the permissions to manage your child's access to social networking sites. For more information on such tools, see www.getnetwise.org.
- It is important to remember that social networking and interactive sites can be accessed through a mobile device as well as a PC or laptop. So any discussions with your child should cover how they access and use social networking sites, including, for example, through their mobile phone.
- You should become familiar with the social networking and interactive sites your children are using. Pay particular attention to:
 - i the terms and conditions of the site (i.e. the rules for using the service), but particularly to what is acceptable behaviour or not on the service.
 - ii the age requirement to register for the service, for example whether the service is suitable only for children 13 years and over;
 - iii the safety advice that is provided on the service for the user; and
 - iv the safety tools on the service, including:
 - user profiles – view user profiles to check what personal information is published;
 - privacy controls – look for privacy tools offered by a site, what the privacy settings are (e.g. whether private or public for those under the age of 18 years) and how they can be changed; and
 - reporting concerns – check how users can contact or report any difficulties they are having to the service provider or other agencies.
- Teach children the importance of registering their correct age to ensure that the safety protection tools provided for those under the age of 18 are applied to them so they get the most appropriate content and experience.
- Visit the sites and familiarise yourself with the features the sites have on offer, such as creating a webspace, creating

a profile, blogging, making friends, instant messaging and chatting, posting videos and photos.

- Remind your child to review their contact/ friends list on a regular basis to make sure they want to share their information with everyone on the list.
- Negotiate with your child to visit and view all their profiles on social networking sites; some children have a version for their parents and another for their friends.
- Discuss with your child the mechanisms available to them to manage their profile. All users can change their privacy settings, block users and report abuse, and have the option to cancel their account.

Striking a balance

- Children and young people have strong views about their privacy and it will be important for you to help your child to use social networking sites responsibly and safely, while respecting their privacy.
- There is an important balance between educating children and young people about the risks online, viewing what they are doing and actually trusting them in their use of social networking sites and allowing them a degree of autonomy.

Guarding privacy

- It is critical that children and young people understand the importance of protecting their privacy online. Many, if not all, of the popular social networking sites provide privacy tools to ensure that users can manage whom they choose to interact with and who can post the comments on their blogs or personal sites.
- It is important that children and young people think carefully about adding someone they have only met online to their 'friends list' even if another friend has recommended them – people are not always who they claim to be.
- Talk to your child about the importance of keeping the password to their account or space private to protect against someone taking control of it.
- Mobile phones can be easily lost or stolen. It is a good idea to set up a PIN lock on your child's mobile, so it cannot be used without their permission or if it is lost or stolen.
- Your child should only use auto login (where the site remembers your password for you when you return to it) when signing into a social networking site if PIN protection is being used on their mobile. Otherwise anyone finding their mobile phone and accessing the site from it will be able to access and abuse their social network account, for example by changing their profile, or sending messages to contacts in their name.
- Ensure that your child is aware of the privacy setting options of their account. It is important that you negotiate with your child the appropriate level of privacy and that it matches their level of emotional maturity and understanding.
- Advise your child to be careful not to share any information that may help locate them in the real world. For example, a photograph of a school uniform or street sign.

Managing personal images and video postings

The use and sharing of images and videos has proliferated online, especially on social networking and video-sharing sites. Images and videos can be loaded from cameras and mobile phones. Some mobile devices enable users to upload images and videos directly to social networking sites.

- It is very important that children and young people consider and choose carefully what they share online with friends and the wider community on the Internet, especially as photos can be easily copied and changed.
- The convenience of mobile phones means it is easy to upload images and videos 'on the go'. Particular care should be taken to 'think before you post' to avoid compromising privacy or safety, for example images from a party or of outrageous or compromising behaviour. If a child is posting photos containing their friends, for example, they should seek their friends' permission first.
- Photos and videos can contain information that on its own may seem innocuous, but when put together with other information such as school details can be used to locate and identify the child.
- Photos and videos should be appropriate – not sexually provocative or explicit – so as not to attract unwanted attention from adults who may wish to exploit children and young people.
- Check the 'acceptable use' policies of social networking and other user interactive sites. Most sites will remove explicit and 'inappropriate' images when they are brought to their attention.
- Ask your child whether they are comfortable with the content they are posting being seen by everyone they know and whether it might embarrass them at a later stage.

Managing comments and postings

Many young people go to great lengths in building their profiles and webpages, so receiving comments from the wider community can be exciting, compelling and is expected.

- It is important that children and young people understand the need to be responsible in what they post and contribute to other people's social networking sites – 'think before you post' is a good maxim.
- There have been some incidents of bullying – often among known friends or peers on social networking sites – where bullying in the playground has continued and possibly escalated online. The potential to humiliate and harass individuals through comments and by posting images can be extremely hurtful and have a number of unintended consequences, such as spreading very quickly to a much larger audience online. It is important to set rules with your child about what is OK and not OK to post about anyone known or unknown.
- Emphasise to your child that once a comment or a posting is made, it may not be possible to take it back. It is also important to be aware that what may be sent or posted as a joke, may not be taken in that way. When a message is posted to or about someone, the sender cannot see the impact that their words or images have on the other person.

Managing your teenager's flirtatious behaviour

- It is important to discuss and establish boundaries with your child from an early age, about flirting online, especially when your child begins to show an interest in and is beginning to use interactive services.
- Teenagers may engage in flirting or sexual exploration online, and it is important to discuss the need for boundaries in relationships even with known boyfriends and girlfriends.
- You should discuss, and emphasise, particularly with older teenagers, the dangers of flirting with people they have first met online. As some people lie about who they are, you never really know who you are interacting with or talking to.

Meeting in person with people first met online

Meeting people in the real world who are only known online is not new or particular to social networking or user interactive sites. Children and young people often assume that those people they have spent time interacting with online are real friends and therefore safe to meet. However, great caution should be applied.

- It is important for children and young people to think very carefully before agreeing to meet anyone they have met online and agree that any such meetings should be approved by their parents or carers.
- You should ensure that any meetings take place in public and with trusted adults present.
- It is important to address and consider the possibility of your child being involved in organised 'gang' or rivalry meetings in the real world, which can be arranged online.
- It is also important to recognise that there are online groups and communities where children and young people meet that can be educational and fun.

Getting help and reporting abuse

- It is critical to maintain an ongoing dialogue and have regular conversations with your child about anything that is worrying them or has happened online.
- If you suspect that your child or another child is being solicited online or is being 'groomed' by someone with a sexual interest in children, it is important to report it to the appropriate authorities.
- Preserving the evidence of any abusive or potentially illegal communication is important. This evidence can be helpful if you need to report to the child's school, the service provider or to the police. If you have any copies of communications, images, messages or other content related to the solicitation of a child, it is important to save them and pass them to law enforcement agencies.
- It is very important that both you and your child understand how to report anything that might be inappropriate or illegal either to the service provider, law enforcement or other designated agency.
- There are now a number of places to report potentially illegal behaviour online, for example: in the UK, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (www.ceop.org.uk).

Extract from: home office task force on child protection on the internet

Good practice guidance for the providers of social networking and other user interactive services 2008.