

Help Your Children Social-Network Safely and Wisely

By Matt Keenan, JD, and Eleonora di Liscia, JD

As all parents know, the teenage years can be rough. Recent research confirms that a teenaged brain's judgment center isn't fully formed. Throw in a new way to make friends and communicate—like Facebook—and you might have to deal with negative repercussions for a long time to come. The good news is that there are ways you can help your child navigate their Web presence so they can enjoy the benefits of social networking and avoid the pitfalls.

For starters, parents can insist that they be made a friend on their child's Facebook, said Kaine Osburn, principal of Niles West High School in Skokie, Illinois. That way you can monitor your child's online conduct. Parents, however, should avoid commenting on their children's page or to their children's friends. You should be an observer, not a participant, said Osburn.

If parents see cause for concern on their child's Facebook page, "They should talk to their kids about their decision making in that context, just like they would if they were offline," said Osburn. "If parents see the kinds of things their children's friends are posting, they have a chance to talk to their children about the kind of friends they choose."

General guidelines on posting include avoiding anything that is embarrassing, illegal, violates the school code of conduct or is of a sexual nature. Children also should refrain from bullying, making personal attacks, or criticizing their teacher, employer, or their friends' personal life.

Violating these commonsense guidelines can have real-life consequences. Children who bully others online may find themselves more likely to fight at school. If children post comments or pictures of themselves engaging in illegal activity or making cyber-threats, they could be barred from school teams, clubs, or activities. They may even be subject to criminal prosecution, possibly even on felony charges. Poor decision making online may also limit their educational options later.

According to Rhonda Boehne, director of human resources and college legal counsel for Kaskaskia College in Illinois, many colleges use Facebook and similar sites to screen applicants. Even those institutions that do not screen students regularly may research these sites when questionable information about a potential student pops up.

"Individuals who aspire to become college students or future employees always need to keep in mind that the information they share on these sites is often tantamount to putting the information on the front page of the local newspaper where the college admissions office or the employer is located. Even when individuals think their information is private and can only be accessed by 'friends,' there are ways the information eventually gets out," said Boehne.

“Public postings of a sexual nature are not the things colleges think are reflective of the kind of student they want to have,” said Osburn

Besides the taboos mentioned above, Boehne advises avoiding some of the less obvious pitfalls. For example, students should not post negative comments about the college they wish to attend or post photos of themselves in clothing with offensive slogans or writing. On the other hand, Facebook can be used as a means to enhance a student’s credibility and qualifications in the application process, said Boehne.

A college applicant “would benefit from tailoring their social-networking pages to show them in constructive and positive situations, which would show their potential to become responsible and productive college students,” said Boehne.

Apart from protecting their child’s social reputation, parents should also advise their children on safety rules. Children should never post personally identifiable information, such as their address, phone number, social security number, or pictures of where they live. Alert child predators can use this information to target children.

Unfortunately, banning Facebook in your home is simply not an option. Children today live in an online world. They will find a way to go online, in secret if they have to, and that means less communication at home.

Said Osburn, “Parents need to think of Facebook as an online party. It’s fine for kids to go to parties, but we have to help kids make good decisions about what parties they go to and what kids should do at those parties.”

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