

Socializing Online

By age 13, millions of kids have created accounts on social networking sites. But just like in the offline world, there are things you need to know to have a more positive experience when meeting new people and socializing with friends or acquaintances. The best way to learn these digital life skills is to talk about it with the people you trust most – your family.

Here are some conversation starters to help you navigate this topic:

1. Who did you talk with today?

You may already talk about whom you sat next to on the bus or during lunch, but expand that conversation to include text, social media or virtual worlds. From there, you can find out some of the “what” that was discussed. Keep in mind, these conversations should be two-way. If you’re a parent, share who you’ve connected with today.

It’s important to talk about the fact that people aren’t always who they say they are online and sometimes people can be dangerous, rude or hurtful. Talk about what to do if someone you don’t know tries to connect beyond a virtual world, or you receive a message that is inappropriate or scary. Reinforce to each other that it’s ok to block or delete people if you feel in anyway threatened by them. Talk about the people you can tell if that ever happens – someone you all trust, such as a parent, an older sibling, a teacher – who can help think through next steps.

2. What’s ok to share?

Decide together what is just enough – and what is too much. Certain things are important not to share online, such as your real name in a virtual world or personal information via social media (i.e., address, social security number, phone number). But in a social environment, “oversharing” can harm others or negatively affect your reputation.

The best rule of thumb –think twice before sharing something very personal. Consider how posts, photos, quotes, texts, etc. are all part of your identity and anything you put out there digitally can be viewed by a vast, invisible audience of people you may or may not know.

Speak up when you see something you don’t think should be shared. You can learn from others’ mistakes, as well as your own. And lastly, it’s 100% appropriate for a son/daughter to push back on what their parents post about them: “Hey mom – stop posting those #TBT photos of me!”

3. What’s with all the drama?

In a digital setting, it’s easier to forget or ignore how others may feel about what you say because you can’t see faces. Ask each other if you have ever experienced digital drama. What did you do? Talk about the best way to avoid it entirely. Talk about how to show respect and kindness to others and why you socialize with people who care about you most. Share about times you have overcome drama – in the digital or the real world. The same social situations and skills apply. Decide when it’s best to hide, block or delete someone who causes stress. Identify a few people to turn to – a parent, an older sibling, a trusted teacher – when a problem continues.

Safer, Smarter Decisions

- Stick with age-appropriate sites or applications.
- Learn how to control your privacy settings.
- Make sure your usernames/screen names don't give away too many personal details (name, age, address, city, etc.)
- Know and follow the rules of sites and applications.
- Never share passwords.
- Never make plans to meet a stranger offline. Tell someone if a stranger makes that request.
- Delete or block people who are not kind or cause you stress.
- Put down the device when you are driving or walking.

Positive Actions

- Be "friends" with or follow your family. You can look out for each other—and you can also limit what they see if you want to keep some things just among your closest friends.
- Explore digital worlds, applications and social networks together first so you can talk about safety in that environment, observe how others interact, and shadow good decision-making.
- Think about your future and about the feelings of others before you post.
- Flag inappropriate content.
- Tell someone you trust if another person violates your safety or treats you poorly.
- Unplug or power down your device and have awesome face-to-face social interactions.
- Start a [Connect for Respect](#) team at your school to promote positive, supportive peer relationships online and offline and prevent all kinds of bullying.
- Host a "[One Good Thing Party](#)," a digital celebration of friends who share one good thing that has been done to make the Internet a better place OR the world a better place using the Internet.

Places for More Info

- [Common Sense Education](#) has great information about ways to support youth as they transform into digital citizens in its [Topic Centers](#), [videos](#) and on parents' [blog](#).
- [ConnectSafely.org](#) has a number of resources available for students, parents and educators to ensure safe and positive internet use, including [safety tips](#) and [parents' guides](#).
- [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's NetSmartz](#)® program has great resources focused on [internet safety](#), [cyberbullying](#), [mobile phone use](#), and other resources and videos that can help parents and students talk about these issues.
- [Platform for Good](#) is a project of the Family Online Safety Institute that has a number of [interactive tools](#) to fuel digital citizenship and online safety, including a new guide called "[Tech for Success](#)."
- [Stopbullying.gov](#) has a number of resources to help prevent cyberbullying.