

Common Sense on Facebook

What is Facebook?

Facebook is an enormous, free social networking site with hundreds of millions of users all over the world. To use Facebook, you sign up with your email address, name, gender, date of birth, and password. That gives you a profile page, which you can then fill in by answering questions on Facebook's forms. The questions are designed to help you create connections with people you know — called "Friends" — as well as display things you like, such as books and movies. You also have the option to upload a photo of yourself.

Facebook is not supposed to be used by people under 13, but it's not difficult to create a page if you are younger. If Facebook discovers a user under 13, they will delete the profile.

Some facts

Facebook has more than 500 million registered users (*Facebook, 2010*). If it were a country, it would have the third largest population in the world.

73% of 12- to 17-year olds have at least one social networking profile (*Pew, 2010*).

22% of teens check social networks 10 or more times per day (*Common Sense Media, 2009*).

54% of teens have joined an online community or social network group in support of a cause they care about (*Common Sense Media, 2009*).

48% of Facebook-using parents with kids under 18 are "friends" with their teens on Facebook (*Retrevo, 2010*).

More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared on Facebook each month (*Facebook, 2010*).

In addition to displaying your profile information and likes, Facebook allows you do lots of other things, such as write "status updates" that tell others where you are and what you're doing, play games, chat with others, comment on other people's pages (called their "wall"), and more. You don't need a computer to be on Facebook. You can view and update your page remotely from your smart phone or another mobile device.

Why it matters

Facebook. Our teens love it. But parents hear lots of negative things about it, too. Sure, Facebook has its share of sexy photos, pictures of kids drinking (and worse), cyberbullying, and even feuds that extend to the real world. But Facebook can also be a great way for kids to stay in touch with their friends and showcase their interests (and have fun).

Teens feel a lot of social pressure to use Facebook and, if used responsibly, Facebook can be a useful, fun tool for teens to stay in touch with friends. But kids can be cruel and will use any tool at their disposal to hurt, embarrass, or harass one another.

Parents often hear stories about teens misusing Facebook and become concerned that their children could get caught up in problems stemming from Facebook drama. The important thing for parents to know is that it's not the site that's a problem. It's the way it's used. That's why talking to your kids about responsible online behavior is so important.

That said, there are still safety and privacy issues to be aware of. Kids can post their actual, physical location, stating where they are and inviting friends to join them. Even friends who don't have Facebook can be tagged to a location. Kids and teens should disable this feature.

Facebook can also open teens up to unwanted comments from both friends and non-friends, it can spark feuds that drag on and can carry over into real life, and it can become an obsession to the point where teens fret about their online status. Perhaps the thorniest of all, it can expose photos, thoughts, and feelings that, once posted, are out of your teen's control.

Teens using Facebook are creating a digital footprint that can live a long time online. And because teens can be impulsive, they are liable to say and do things on Facebook that they may later regret. It's easy for your teen's friends to forward anything that's posted on your teen's page — including instant-message conversations. What seemed important or funny in the moment may get teens into personal trouble now and professional trouble later.

Understanding Facebook privacy

On Facebook, your name and profile photo are always publicly viewable. That means other Facebook users can see your name and photo when they land on your page. You can limit who sees all of your other information, as well as who can write on your page by using Facebook's privacy settings. You can make your information viewable to Everyone, Friends of Friends, Friends Only. You can also limit who can see photos, status updates, comments, and more. (Privacy settings control other things, too. See our video for more information.)

If your teen has a Facebook page, sit down with her and review her privacy settings. But beyond that, discuss the importance of controlling your own information. Once your child posts something, it's out of her control and can be copied, pasted, or forwarded by other people.

By creating your own page and familiarizing yourself with Facebook's controls, you can help your teen to use it responsibly and respectfully. Our tips can help you navigate this new territory.

Tips for talking to teens about Facebook

- » **Talk to kids about controlling their information.** Encourage them to be selective about what they post. But it's not just what they post that can get away from them. Their activities on Facebook, including the applications they use and games they play, can be viewed by others.
- » **Use privacy settings.** Facebook's default settings tend to keep information public until a user makes it private (although Facebook is a little stricter with minors' accounts). Review the settings with your teen, and make sure they are set to "Friends Only."
- » **Disable location services.** Facebook's Places feature lets users post their location. Kids can also "tag" their friends' location when they're together. These features can be — and should be — disabled in the privacy settings of kids' and teens' accounts.
- » **Set rules about what's appropriate to post.** No sexy photos, no drinking photos, no photos of them doing something that could hurt them in the future. They also need to be thoughtful about their status updates, wall posts, and comments on friends' posts. Remind them that once they post something, it's out of their hands.
- » **Encourage teens to self-reflect before they self-reveal.** Teens are very much in the moment and are likely to post something they didn't really mean. Work with them on curbing that impulse. Teach them to ask themselves why they're posting something, who will be able to read it, and whether it be misunderstood or used against them later.
- » **Watch out for ads.** There are tons of ads on Facebook, and most major companies have profile pages. Marketers actively use Facebook to target advertising to your teen.
- » **Create your own page.** The best way to learn the ins and outs of Facebook is to create your own page. A great way to start talking to your teens about their Facebook experience is to ask them to help you create your own page.
- » **"Friend" younger teens.** If your kids are in middle school, it may be a sound policy to know what they're posting, since kids that age don't necessarily understand that they're creating a digital footprint that will long outlast the passions of the moment.
- » **Talk to your high school-aged teens about whether or not they're comfortable letting you "friend" them.** Many will be. If you are your teen's friend, don't fill her page with comments and don't "friend" her friends. As it is, simply having parents is mortifying enough for some teens. Your kids' friends don't need evidence of your existence.
- » **Choose your battles.** You will see the good, the bad, and the truly unfathomable. If you don't want your kids to unfriend you, don't ask them about every transgression. Keep it general.
- » **Be a good role model.** Remember that they can see what you post, too. Model good behavior for your teens and keep your own digital footprint clean.

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