

TIPS FOR SAFE SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR TEENS

These tips, based on the latest research, will help teens' socializing stay fun and safe.

Be your own person. Don't let friends or strangers pressure you to be someone you aren't. And know your limits. You may be internet savvy, but people and relationships change, and unexpected stuff can happen on the internet.

Be nice online. Or at least treat people the way you'd want to be treated. People who are nasty and aggressive online are at greater risk of being bullied or harassed themselves. If someone's mean to you, try not to react, definitely don't retaliate, and talk to a trusted adult or a friend who can help. Use privacy tools to block the meanies.

Think about what you post. Sharing provocative photos or intimate details online, even in private emails, can cause you problems later on. Even people you consider friends can use this info against you, especially if they become ex-friends.

Passwords are private. Don't share your password even with friends. It's hard to imagine, but friendships change and you don't want to be impersonated by anyone. Pick a password you can remember but no one else can guess. One trick: Create a sentence like "I graduated from King School in 15" for the password "IgfKSil5."

Read between the "lines." It may be fun to check out new people for friendship or romance, but be aware that, while some people are nice, others act nice because they're trying to get something. Flattering or supportive messages may be more about manipulation than friendship or romance.

Don't talk about sex with strangers. Be cautious when communicating with people you don't know in person, especially if the conversation starts to be about sex or physical details. Don't lead them on – you don't want to be the target of a predator's grooming. If they persist, call your local police or contact CyberTipline.com.

Avoid in-person meetings. The only way someone can physically harm you is if you're both in the same location, so – to be 100% safe – don't meet them in person. If you really have to get together with someone you "met" online, don't go alone. Have the meeting in a public place, tell a parent or some other solid backup, and bring some friends along.

Be smart when using a cellphone. All the same tips apply with phones as with computers. Be careful who you give your number to and how you use GPS and other technologies that can pinpoint your physical location.

Don't measure your own value based on what others post. People typically post planned and happy photos and stories online and don't usually share their boring or sad moments or unflattering photos. Don't assume that others have better lives than you do, based on what they post.