

Common Sense on Internet Safety for High School Kids

High school Internet safety means controlling privacy and reputation

High school teens are living their lives online. They're checking their friends' status updates (and posting their own), they're watching their favorite shows, they're uploading photos and videos, they're playing games, chatting on IM, video chatting, exploring their interests, and accessing information and files that fuel their passions. They're also becoming part of Internet culture, where it's all about what's new right now. Because information on the Internet moves at the speed of light, high schoolers are likely to get involved in new stuff long before you've gotten used to yesterday's news.

Some facts

93% of 12- to 17-year-olds go online (*Pew, 2010*).

22% of all teen girls — 11% of teen girls ages 13-16 years old — say they have electronically sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude images of themselves (*National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com, 2008*).

As of February 2010, 73% of wired teens now use social networking websites, up from 55% in 2006 (*Pew, 2010*).

43% of teens are exposed to cyberbullying in one form or another, yet only 1 in 10 have told their parents (*U.S. National Crime Prevention Council, 2008*).

Internet safety at this age requires that you continue to monitor high-schoolers' online lives, staying as involved as you can and injecting your own values to counteract some of the less desirable aspects of the Internet. In the high school years, teens' online interactions can really affect their futures. Much of what they discover and contribute to can be positive and enriching — if they play by the rules. If not, their privacy, reputation, and even their physical safety could be at risk.

Why Internet safety matters

In today's 24/7 media world, it's hard to believe that remnants of your digital footprint can remain online for a long, long time. Teens don't realize that once something is posted on the Internet it can come back to haunt them. Even if they take down an inappropriate photo, the electronic record remains. And during the time a potentially embarrassing photo is public, it may have been copied and circulated to thousands of people without your teen's knowledge.

Teens may not realize that what they post sets their reputation. Other people might judge them based on their profiles. It's not just inappropriate photos that put them at risk. Teens might also post references to underage drinking and engage in mean-spirited chat. As kids get older, stuff they've posted in the past can reappear. According to a 2008 Kaplan survey, 10% of college admissions officers at the nation's top 500 colleges looked at applicants' social networking profiles. 38% of them said that what they saw "negatively affected" their opinion of the applicant.

Teens make new online connections all the time. Programs that connect people — like social networks or location sharing apps — can potentially expose your teen to people they don't know who may not be trustworthy. Teens need to know not to give up their privacy or allow strangers to identify who — or where — they are.

Internet Safety Basics

- » Give your teens a code of conduct. Tell them that if they wouldn't say something to someone's face, they shouldn't text it, IM it, or post it.
- » Remind your teens to use social networks' privacy settings so only their friends can see their stuff.
- » Your kids should never open an email from a stranger — it may contain viruses that can harm a computer.
- » Tell them not to send pictures to strangers or view pictures that strangers send to them.
- » Passwords should be kept private (except to parents).
- » Explain to your teen that people aren't necessarily who they say they are in cyberspace.
- » If your child plans to meet someone, it should be in a public place, with a friend.

Strategies for responsible — and safer — online life

- » **There's no such thing as "private" online.** Anything posted can be seen by or forwarded to strangers, college admissions officers, and potential employers.
- » **Have an agreement about what's okay to post.** Teen years are full of self-expression and rebellion. Just make sure that your teens know your rules about suggestive material or other content that will reflect poorly on them. This means no embarrassing or cruel posts, no hate speech or groups, no compromising pictures they wouldn't want the whole world to see.
- » **Help your teen be a good digital citizen.** Online cheating is still cheating. And flagging inappropriate content isn't tattling — it's keeping the Web a place where people want to hang out and where they can feel safe.
- » **The Golden Rule applies in cyberspace.** If they wouldn't do it in real life, they shouldn't do it online.
- » **Agree on downloads.** What music is okay? Which video sites? What games?
- » **Encourage critical thinking.** Your teens should ask "who posted this? Why?" Thinking this way will help them find trustworthy information, and it will also help them avoid online scams that deliver spyware and viruses directly to your home. They should also think critically about their own posts. Teach them to ask, "Why am I posting this? Who will see it? Could it be misunderstood?"
- » **Stay in safe neighborhoods.** Just as your teens learn not to walk down dark alleys alone at night, they need to know how to avoid creepy places online. And if they do venture there, remind teens that unpleasant content or talk should get trashed immediately.
- » **Review your own habits carefully.** Parents are the ultimate role models. Keep channels of communication open.
- » **Better safe than sorry.** Make sure teens are comfortable telling you if anything menacing or cruel happens — no matter what site they were on.