

A Teen's Guide to Social Media Safety

Parents can worry about a lot. Like everything else in this world, social media is something that the adults in your life will get nervous about. While there's good reason for that, it's not easy for you to understand why Snapchat, Instagram or Twitter are such a big deal.

There are many different reasons why social media can be a dangerous playground. While the horror stories all focus on kids being lured or abducted, there are far more threats that are less severe. No matter your age or sex, it is important to follow some important rules for social media safety.

Before you roll your eyes, please know these guidelines exist to protect you! It's not about telling you what you can and can't do; rather, it's about offering guidelines to protect you from being ripped off, bullied, disrespected, or scammed...all while you are using your social media responsibly.

Check Your Privacy Settings

In most cases, the default privacy settings will give your posts the most public exposure which can be very dangerous.

Important Privacy Setting Resource Links:

Snapchat <https://support.snapchat.com/en-US/a/privacy-settings>

Instagram <https://help.instagram.com/116024195217477>

Twitter <https://help.twitter.com/en/safety-and-security/twitter-privacy-settings>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/help/325807937506242/>

Why It's Important

If you've never checked or updated your privacy settings, then people you don't even know can see your posts. Even if you think you are being careful about what you post, it's common for teens to post sensitive information without even realizing it. It could be something as simple as an identifying background in one of your pictures, but online predators find easy prey in public profiles.

Keep your social profile strictly private. The best settings are where only friends can see what you post because you never really know who your friends are friends with online, so the "Friends of Friends" setting can leave you exposed and vulnerable.

Be Cautious of Friend Requests

It's fun to connect with new people through social media platforms, but isn't there something suspicious when a complete stranger sends you a friend request? Play it safe and accept friend requests only from friends in the real world.

Threats can range from the criminally-driven (adults and other teens) to spam bots (fake profiles) and cyber-bullying (fake or copied profiles).

- If you do not personally know the person making the friend request, your best move is to delete it
- Fake profiles are often incomplete (missing information or very few posts), relatively new (very few posts or created just recently), and/or have few friends/connections
- Copied profiles look legitimate because they've copied another person's information, including their photos (another great reason to keep your privacy on lock-down!), but again will have been created recently and/or have very few posts or friends
- All of the above are warning signs of people/profiles of whom you should steer clear!

Think Before You Post!

Limit personal contact information in your profile and posts. Never give away your phone number or address. Keep private information private. If you want to share this information with a friend, do it directly by phone or text.

Why It's Important

It's important to think first before you post what you are thinking or feeling. Even though a post can be deleted, you can never permanently erase something that has been published on the internet. That's also a good reason why you should face your problems instead of posting them.

More Tips for Online Safety

Avoid using location services like Foursquare; and disable location services on Snapchat and Instagram when posting photos. It's a great feature, but if your privacy settings allow outsiders to view your content, you are exposing yourself (and whomever you tag) at risk! Imagine this scenario...

It is Friday night, and you and three friends are at the theater to watch the new release; you snap a few group selfies before heading in to find your seats. You post the 4 images, tag everyone, mark the title of the movie, and leave your location service activated. Any unscrupulous person now has the following information...

- Your location, likely to include identifying features in the background of your photos
- Photos and names of your entire group
- Given the movie start time and run time (both found at the theater's web site), it can be estimated the timeframe at which you will exit the theater
- You're likely without parent supervision

This is a situation brimming with risk! Furthermore, are you wearing sweatshirts of the school you attend? What other personally-identifying information is available? Professionals who are experts at [information] collection begin to construct what is called a "Pattern of Life", and if you unknowingly drop enough bread crumbs, it becomes all too easy to not only tell where you are, but also where you will be, such as the closing shift at work, late practices, early classes, a jogging route, or anything that could potentially leave you vulnerable.

To help keep yourself safe, do not post in real-time; wait until the next day. The memory is created and shared, and all of the features of the app and the post can be maximized, but the unsafe information becomes obsolete.

If you do meet somebody new online, never agree to meet them off-line. This is a typical luring scenario where the amount of risk outweighs any potential thrill or curiosity. You must approach online friends (who you don't know in the real world) as a potential predator. While that may sound overly-protective or paranoid, it is because even if it feels like you know them; you really have no idea who is on the other end of that wifi connection.

If somebody you met online sends or requests provocative pictures, tell an adult.

- You'll be given all sorts of reassurances, but once you click [send], that image is out there, potentially forever
- If you know someone who has been asked, share with them the risks and do all you can to dissuade them from doing so
- If you know someone who has made that request of someone else, step in and say something

Finally, be aware of the ramifications of using your cell phone at school; and discuss responsible behavior within school guidelines.