

Do You Know What Sites Your Child Might Be On

YouTube. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Snapchat. Club Penguin. Minecraft. The use of digital media and technology is evolving at a dizzying pace. It has changed the way our children interact with the world, and has become an integral part of their daily lives. It is both our job as educators and your job as parents to instill the safe and responsible use of technology.

Young people are using the immense power of technology to create, connect, explore and learn in ways never before imagined. With these opportunities come many risks, especially for a child. Cyber-bullying, digital cheating and digital inappropriateness are taking place in schools and homes across the country. Young people face ethical challenges online on a daily basis, often without guidance. Parents and teachers alike struggle with how to help kids thrive in this brave new world.

Compare the use of the Internet to your child going to an unfamiliar city without you. As a parent, you would normally go along on such a trip to help your child avoid obvious risks. A child in the "safety" of his own home encounters many risks while on-line. Just as you would be there to help your child navigate through that city, your child needs your help to navigate this new on-line world using your life experience and moral compass as a guide to help avoid trouble.

What You Can Do

Create opportunities to talk with your children about their activity online and find out what sites they like. Ask questions, and listen to them describe their time online. Educate yourself about social media or have your child show you the ropes. You may want to create your own profile on the sites your child is using to experience the risks firsthand. Some key points to remember while having these conversations are:

Embrace their world! - None of us want technology to isolate us from our kids. Do some homework, and ask your kids to share the sites they visit, the apps they use, the songs and videos they stream and the gadgets they love. Let's join the fun and help them reach their fullest potentials, and at the same time keep them safe and help them to maintain integrity off-line as well as on-line.

Safety first – It is not uncommon for children to innocently share too much personal information and post pictures with names, addresses, and detailed descriptions of upcoming vacations. With the threat of potential wrongdoers and online predators, the Internet is becoming an increasingly dangerous place for children and teenagers. Warn your children of the dangers of sharing information, and to never make plans to meet someone that they have met online.

Nothing is private – There are companies that exist whose sole purpose is to scrape social networking sites for personal information and then sell that information to marketing businesses, or worse yet, identity thieves. Remind your children what

personal information is and how your entire family would be effected if the information got into the wrong hands.

Social networks are constantly updating and changing their sites and apps. You will want to familiarize yourself with the privacy settings that exist for these networks and regularly check to make sure your information is being kept private. Work with your child to make sure you both understand the settings and have them as tight as possible.

Being online does not mean you are anonymous – Nothing on the Internet is truly anonymous or temporary. Engage in a conversation about how anonymity is an illusion. Anonymous comments and posts are truly not anonymous. These posts on social media can be tracked by law enforcement, particularly if a post can be interpreted as a threat.

Digital media lasts forever - It is important for children and parents to understand that a child's digital footprint lives with him/her forever. Constantly remind children about their "digital footprint," or reputation, and how it will forever define them to the world. Potential employers, college admissions offices and potential dates look at a person's Facebook page to see what kinds of things were posted. There are even services to look at pictures, videos and posts that have been removed years ago from any site! Think of posted digital media is like a digital tattoo; it lasts forever.

Establish an age limit – If you don't currently let your children use social media, it's a good idea to let them know at what age they can start. When kids feel that "It's never going to happen" they are more likely to set up their own, secret profile. When deciding what age you'll let your kids use social media keep in mind nearly every social network requires users to confirm their real age before downloading or creating a profile. Most social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter require users to be at least 13 years old before they can create an account.

Keep your child's Internet use in a common area of your home – Keep Internet use out of your children's bedrooms. Kids are less likely engage in dangerous behavior online when they know their parents can look over their shoulder at any time. Monitoring your children's online activity is a great way to become aware of any dangers that they might be exposed to. If you see something that concerns you, it would be a good opportunity to speak to your children about the importance of protecting themselves online, and discussing why you don't want them visiting certain sites.

Remember the "Golden Rule" – The traditional "Golden Rule" is as true online as it is in real life: Treat people the way you hope to be treated -- with kindness! Teach your children that there is no place for bullying on the web and that it is OK to report this behavior if they see it. Remind them to consider how you and others might feel after they have posted something. Even though others do not use manners on-line, your child does not need to be one of them. Lead by example.