

Tips for Staying Safe on Social Networking Sites

In the 21st century, this safety rule is as important as the older "don't talk to strangers" and "look both ways before crossing the street." If you remember nothing else about Internet safety, remember this.

1 Think about how different sites work before deciding to join a site. Some sites allow anyone and everyone to view postings; others will allow only a defined community of users to access posted content.

2 Think about keeping some control over the information you post. Consider restricting access to your page to a select group of people—for example, your friends from school, your club, your team, or your family.

3 Keep your information to yourself. Don't post your full name, Social Security number, address, phone number, or bank or credit card account numbers—and don't post other people's information either. Be cautious about posting information that could be used to identify you or locate you offline. This could include the name of your school, sports team, clubs, and where you work or hang out.

4 Make sure your screen name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your name, your age, your hometown, or anything else that could be a clue someone could use to figure out who you are and where you can be found.

5 Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing—and knowing—about you. Many people can see your page, including your parents, your teachers, the police, the college you might want to apply to next year, or the job you might want to apply for in 5 years.

6 Remember that once you post information online, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.

7 Consider not posting your photo. It can be altered and broadcast in ways you may not be happy about. If you do post one, ask yourself whether it's one your parents would display in the living room.

8 Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know whom you're dealing with.

9 Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. Before you decide to meet someone, do your research: ask whether any of your friends know the person, and see what background you can dig up through online search engines. If you decide to meet him or her, be smart about it: meet in a public place, during the day, with friends you trust. Tell an adult or a responsible sibling where you're going and when you expect to be back.

10 Trust your gut if you have suspicions. If you feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, tell an adult you trust and report it to the police and the social networking site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.

For More Information:

To learn more about staying safe online, visit the following Web sites:

- OnGuardOnline (<http://www.OnGuardOnline.gov>)
- GetNetWise (<http://www.getnetwise.org>)
- WiredSafety (<http://www.wiredsafety.org>)