

TIPS FOR SAFE SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR PARENTS

Be reasonable and try to set reasonable expectations. Pulling the plug on your child's favorite social site is like pulling the plug on his or her social life. Instead of being protective, it can shut down communication and send kids "underground" where they're more at risk. It's too easy for them to set up free blogs and profiles from anywhere, including friends' houses or even a cell phone.

Talk with your kids about how they use the services. They, not news reports or even experts, are the ones to consult about their social-Web experience. Help them understand basic safety guidelines, such as protecting their privacy (including passwords), not harassing peers, never talking about sex with people they don't know, avoiding in-person meetings with people they "meet" online, and taking care in what they post - because anything people put online can be grabbed, reworked, and used against them.

Support critical thinking and civil behavior because no laws or parental-control software can protect better than a child's developing good sense about safety and relationships. Research shows that kids who are aggressive and mean online toward peers or strangers are at greater risk of becoming victims themselves. So teach them to be good citizens and friends online as much as offline.

Consider requiring internet use in a high-traffic place in your home - not in kids' rooms - to help you stay aware of their online time. This way, you can encourage a balance between online time and their offline academic, sports, and social times. Know that there are also many ways kids can access the Internet away from home, including on many mobile phones and game players.

Try to get your kids to share their profiles and services with you, but be aware that they can have multiple accounts on multiple services. Use search engines and the search tools on social-networking sites to search for your kids' full names, phone numbers and other identifying information. You're not invading their privacy if they're putting personal info in public "places" online. If their pages are private, that's a good thing, but it's even better if they share it with you. Be aware of the apps they use on their mobile devices.