

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

www.parentline.org.au



Social Media and Communication

REMEMBER:

- *Young people often have more knowledge about technology than parents, which can create a lot of fear and anxiety.*
- *Nearly 50% of Australian children access the internet after school, using it up to 6 days a week. 25% use it every day. On average children spend 7.9 hours per fortnight playing online games. (NSW Govt Factsheet "Game over! Knowing when to stop", 2009)*
- *Provide information about risks and safety issues. Balance protection with privacy and independence.*
- *Don't reply to bullying texts or emails. Keep records of all incidents and delete bullies from friend lists.*
- *Sending, receiving and keeping sexual images of children are against the law. Talk with your adolescent about the sorts of photos they take of themselves (and friends), and whether these should be shared.*

Proudly managed by



Social media distribute information through social interaction, generally through the use of internet-based communication and networking tools.

Social media can take many different forms, including internet forums, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and video links. Names you may be familiar with include "Facebook", "MySpace", "MSN", "YouTube" and "Twitter". There are also many other forms of online communication operated via providers such as "Microsoft", "Google" and "iPhone".

There are many more modes of communication than there were even ten years ago, and most of these forums are made accessible (and free) via the internet. And as the internet has been made increasingly available through wireless technology and mobile phones, we never have to be without it.

So what does all this mean for young people and parents? Adolescence is a time of life when peer communication is not just valued, but a priority. You may recall having long phone conversations with your own school friends, even though you'd seen them all day. This connection is part of a young person's developmental needs.

It's the same with young people now – except there are many more ways to keep in touch. Mobile phones, email, texting and webcams are all ways that young people maintain contact.

The difference is that social media allows a young person to have contact with more than one person at once. This lends an element of fun and excitement; adolescents may want to be part of their friendship "group" by meeting online as well as at school. Social media also gives young people an opportunity to be creative, get feedback from friends, or just keep updated.

Safety issues

Because all of these forums are (relatively) new, concerns naturally exist about content, safety, and security. Who owns what? And where do things go once they're put online?

As a parent you may have many questions about these issues. Remember that all of these websites, if properly managed, will have information about privacy, options for reporting concerns, and information for parents.

Also remember that once something is uploaded onto the web, whether it is an image or statement, it is accessible. By law the person uploading must state they have the right to do so, but this doesn't mean they can always control who sees what. Whilst forums like "Facebook" ask people to be "friends" in order to access another's personal information, there are various levels of privacy settings. And often it can be tempting to accept an offer of friendship from someone unknown, especially for young people who feel isolated or alone.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is any bullying that is carried out through technology such as the internet or mobile phones. This can include:

- Abusive, threatening or harassing texts or images sent by mobile phone;
- Abusive, threatening or harassing emails, either written individually or forwarded;
- Forwarding malicious content from websites;
- Verbal bullying or exclusion in chatrooms.

Cyberbullying has its own specific impacts because of the accessibility of communication forums - it can take place 24/7 and sometimes it may feel there is no escape.

It can also reach a wider audience, as comments can be directed at many people at the same time. Written words and/or pictures can be permanent and accessible to others.

Cyberbullying can be more secretive and less easily detected, as it does not involve face-to-face contact. It can also be anonymous.

Some strategies for Cyberbullying

- Don't reply to the bully.
- Save the text, images or the website.
- Block and delete the bully.
- Keep a record including the time and date of the incident.
- Make a report to your mobile or internet service provider, or to the website management (eg "Facebook").
- Encourage your child to talk to someone they trust should this occur – parents, teachers or other responsible adults.
- Consider contacting the police in severe or ongoing cases.
- Check out our information sheet on cyberbullying for more ideas.

Tips to Stay Safe Online

- Keep usernames and passwords secret. Ensure security questions are difficult to guess. Install filters on computers.
- Help your teenager to understand risks associated with disclosing their name, home address, or other personal details (including pictures) that might make them identifiable.
- Only put friends they know (and preferably that you know) on their contact/friend lists.
- Encourage young people not to respond should someone make inappropriate comments or make them uncomfortable. Leave the site and report the incident.
- Before uploading a comment or sending a message, think twice about the content; misunderstandings can occur more easily because there are no non-verbal cues in online communication.
- Educate yourself about what young people do online – learn what it's all about and be interested.
- Remember to pay attention to other areas of a young person's life and how they are doing. Discuss any concerns in a way that is meaningful rather than appearing too critical.

Some helpful websites

www.netalert.gov.au

www.reachout.com.au

Sexting and video images

Sexting is the sending of sexual images via mobile phone.

Some adolescents may choose to send photos of themselves or others which can be considered sexual to their friends. These photos may be suggestive or sexually explicit, and involve full or partial nudity.

At times these friends pass these photos onto others. This may happen for many reasons – as a joke, trying to help friends “hook up”, or because of arguments.

Sexting is a very real concern for parents as:

- Adolescents may not think of the images as sexual. Therefore they may not always be aware of the risks associated with sharing these photos;
- It isn't always easy for adolescents to think through the consequences of sharing the photos (eg they may not think about what happens to the photo once it has been sent);
- Once a photo has been taken and shared it is “out there” forever and can reappear later;
- By sharing sexual photos, adolescents become vulnerable to social embarrassment, ostracism or bullying;
- Photos sent via a mobile phone can be uploaded onto computers and sent via e-mail to any email address. These emails can then be forwarded to other addresses, and so on;
- Pictures can also be uploaded onto social networking sites and accessed more freely than intended;
- Photos could eventually be accessed by someone who might use them for their own sexual gratification;
- Adolescents are often not aware that they could be breaking the law (sending, receiving and keeping sexual images of children could be seen as breaking the law).

Tips for Parents

Remember that young people view technology in a very different way to their parents. Nowadays it is much more acceptable to share information and pictures; in fact this is regarded as normal communication.

Talk with your teenager about:

- What sort of photos they take of themselves, or let others take of them. Let your teenager know they don't have to take photos of themselves (or others), especially if this makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Personal boundaries – what information they think is okay to share and what information is personal (this applies to all information shared on social networking sites);
- Sharing photos of themselves and others. Sharing photos always requires the consent of the person involved. Let them know they should only share photos that they would be happy for other adults (including parents) to see;

Remember that it is normal for teenagers to be uncertain about sexual issues and sexuality. They may also be experiencing peer pressure, or be feeling isolated from friends.

A conversation about sexting should therefore be seen as part of the bigger discussions on personal safety and boundaries. See our information sheet on Protective Behaviours for more ideas about this.

For more information:

www.school.nsw.edu.au/click
www.community.nsw.gov.au