Parent Tips

Family Centre

Parents' Guide to Social Networking Websites

You've probably heard the names – Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Instagram, and Blackberry Messenger. These are some of the top social networking websites that have become an online craze for young people and for many adults. These social networking sites can also be potential breeding grounds for gang recruitment. The good news is that young people can protect themselves and their personal information easily, if they know how.

Young people in Bermuda are very involved in technology and social media. Much of that activity is positive but negatives have included cyber-bullying, posted pictures of gang signs and sharing gang language. Many young people don't even know what they are doing, but they are putting themselves on the radar where others could associate them with a gang, form opinions of them and even victimize them.

Social networking websites may seem high-tech, especially to the non-tech savvy user, but they're fairly easy to use and to understand. They differ from traditional websites in that they allow users to interact with the site and with other users. Many of the popular social networking websites let users create personal profiles, add photos, write in a public blog, send messages to others, and invite people to become their online friend – all with just a few clicks of the mouse.

None of this technology is inherently dangerous, and if it's safely used it can be a great creative outlet for young people and a way to get them excited about technology. However, many young people are at-risk and are sharing too much information online and aren't aware that anyone with an Internet connection can view it. As a parent, you can teach your teen how to safely use social networking websites and make sure that they do. Below are some ways that you can protect your teen and their personal information online.

TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT THE RISKS

- Explain that online information and images can live forever. It can be very hard and sometimes impossible to take down information that is posted, and photos and information may already have been copied and posted elsewhere.
- Tell your teen not to post any identifying information online. This includes their cell phone number, home address, school name, and anything else that a stranger could use to locate them.
- Explain that anyone in the world can access what they post online.
- Tell your teen that some college admissions boards and employers are checking social networking sites before they admit students or hire people.

- Remind your teen never to give out their passwords to anyone but you – not even their friends. Explain that if someone has their password, they could post embarrassing and unsafe information about them on their personal pages and even pose as your children to talk to other people.
- Make sure that children understand that some people they meet online may not be who they say they are. Explain that many people on the Internet are not always truthful about their identity and may even pretend to be someone else. It's important to stress that young people should never agree to meet face-to-face with people that they met online.

PROTECT THEM FROM DANGERS

- MySpace and some other social networking websites let users set their profiles to private so that only their friends – usually defined as people that know their full name or email address – can contact them. Make sure younger teens' profiles are set to private.
- Go online with your teen and have them show you all of their personal profiles. Ask to see some of their friends' profiles too. If they have a blog or share photos online, ask to see them as well.
- Treat your teen's online activities as you would their offline activities. Ask questions about what they do, who their friends are, and if they have made any new friends.
- Set clear rules that you can agree on regarding what your children are allowed to do online. Make sure you decide if your teen is allowed to post photos of themselves and open accounts without your permission.

HOW YOU CAN HELP THEM

- Have your teen tell you if they ever see anything online that makes them uncomfortable. Make sure they understand that you won't blame them.
- Ask them to come to you if anything happens online that hurts or scares them. Tell them that you won't punish them by banning them from the Internet – this is a big reason why many kids don't talk to their parents about their online problems.
- Report any cases of possible child sexual exploitation, no matter how small, to the Police.

Reference:
http://www.ncpc.org/topics/internet-safety/social-networking-websites

If you would like more information on this topic you can contact Family Centre and ask to speak with the Community Support Worker at 232-1116.

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