



Is the Child in Your Care Ready for the Internet and Social Media?

If a youth in your life is begging to join a social network, it's a serious undertaking that involves proper education and action from caring adults. We know there are many positive elements of the Internet,¹ and we also know it's imperative to give children safe and monitored access to help them carefully navigate the Internet insofar as their maturity and development allows. Regardless of whether the child already has social media accounts, or whether they're just beginning to enter into the online world, these are some important points for caring adults to consider, including: age, maturity, psychological capability, the ability and freedom to be able to disclose when fearful or in trouble, and knowledge of reporting malicious material.



Social media use by children is becoming increasingly popular. Many youth are able to utilize social networking sites by using their own smart phones at younger ages than ever before. In 2015, one parent survey found that 75 percent of 4-year-olds owned or had access to smartphones or tablets, and that 97 percent of children use smartphones with Internet access (many before their first birthday).² According to the Pew Research Center, 24 percent of teens go online "almost constantly," attributing this to the widespread availability of smartphones.³ Additionally, 22 percent of teens log onto their preferred social media site/app more than 10 times each day, and more than half of tweens and teens log onto a social media site more than once a day.⁴ As is becoming evident with the proliferation of new apps, teens are consistently diversifying their social media usage, with the majority of teens (71 percent) using more than one social networking site at a time.⁵

It's challenging to think of a specific age that children should be before beginning to utilize social media. Many social media websites and apps require children to be 13 in order to create accounts. This isn't to protect developing brains, rather, it's the age set by Congress per the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA),⁶ which prevents companies from marketing and collecting certain types of information from youth under 13.⁷ However, most children are technologically savvy enough to create their own accounts using fake information—or their parents help them. A consumer reports survey found that 7.5 million Facebook users were younger than 13, and 5 million were under the age of 10.⁸ Among the children who were 10, 95 percent of their parents knew the children were using the site, while 78 percent of their parents helped create the account⁹—despite the fact that doing so is in direct violation of the terms of service.

Aside from any legal concerns of allowing young children to join social media, there is also a more important issue of maturity and psychological capability. As explained by Michael Rich, M.D., director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children's Hospital, "Some kids may be ready to handle social media under the legal age of 13, but most probably can't. You are the best judge of your child. Ask: Can she [or he] use it in ways that are healthy and respectful of themselves and of others?"¹⁰ And not only that, are they psychologically capable of handling what they encounter? A new phenomenon has been identified by the American Academy of Pediatrics as "Facebook depression"¹¹ that develops within tweens and teens after

spending large amounts of time on social networking sites such as Facebook (but also including other social media apps)—increasing social isolation and the online seeking of affirmation. Other concerns have to do with children who become preoccupied with receiving attention via their posts, developing a tendency to measure self-worth to the quantity of followers or "likes," which might cause them to behave in ways that they would not normally behave in order to receive affirmation.

Below are a series of questions to consider, and eventually ask the youth when charged with the responsibility of helping children navigate safely online:

Privacy settings and risks: Can the child truly control his/her information, such as keeping passwords private, reviewing content from photos/posts and limiting the disbursement of personal information? The data is showing that children often can't. McAfee found that only 61 percent of children have enabled privacy settings to protect their social networking accounts, and 52 percent don't disable their location and GPS services, which allows strangers within the apps to have access to the youth's physical location. Worse, even if the GPS services were in fact disabled, 14 percent of children posted their home addresses online.¹² The risk of adults with bad intentions utilizing the Internet to identify the exact location of a child at any moment are incredibly high. Children may learn to avoid posting their address after you read this and remind them, but do they also know not to post pictures that provide their school colors, mascot, or images of a home or school in the background?

Carefully consider the responsibility children must exhibit to assess these measures with every post, before providing even limited access to them. Commit to reviewing privacy settings together to optimize any youth's social networking account to have the most secure environment possible, regardless of age. Keep in mind that privacy settings frequently change and are never a failsafe, as a friend's lack of settings could make another child's information vulnerable.

Children must understand that that once something is posted on the Internet, it will be available forever. They need to be conscious that it helps to think not just twice, but THREE times before transmitting or posting information that could affect their own reputation or that of others. Anything that is posted by, or about, the child could forever follow them in this life, and could be used against them when they are older and attempting to engage in real-life social situations, including applying for internships and positions.

Reporting functions: Sometimes children come across foul language, inappropriate visual material or cyberbullying in their online activities. They need to know how to report users or profiles within each social networking account they operate. An important question to ask is, will they be able to address and/or report bad material? What if it's from a friend?

Be a friend, not a foe: Both a beautiful aspect of the Internet, and also a detrimental one, is the fact that there is a vast and oft-invisible audience ready to be amused and entertained 24 hours a day. Unfortunately, what starts out as seemingly "harmless" fun can quickly deteriorate into something dangerous, with public shaming, cyberbullying and even death threats. The Internet is wildly popular for laughing at others at their expense, and posting the information for the world to see without realizing the devastating impact on real lives.¹³ The Online Disinhibition Effect can cause people to act differently online than in person, putting others at risk if they don't treat people respectfully—including a risk of suicide. Does the child know the difference between a friendly joke and actual bullying—and that when there's an image of someone online, that person has real feelings?¹⁴

Pornography and trafficking concerns: Have you talked to the child about his/her private parts and the importance of respecting others? The Internet (and social media, depending on the app and ads) is inundated with pornography, and the largest consumer of online pornography are children between the ages of 12-17. More than a third of teenage boys (13-14

years old) say they've viewed pornography more times than they can count. By 18, nine out of 10 boys and six out of 10 girls have seen pornography on the Internet.¹⁵ Online pornography also contributes to the sexual trafficking of minors, as victims become part of the multitude of videos and images that are circulated.¹⁶ Children who have seen pornography, even unintentionally, are more likely to be sexually abused by a peer or adult.¹⁷

Did you know children are very likely seeing these types of images outside of your sight and hearing? Do they already know how to clear their cache (research says yes, they do)? Could they already have an addiction by age 12? If you automatically answered "no" to any of these questions, then we're already in trouble. It's when we think "it couldn't happen here" that we're already behind the curve.

As a caring adult, it's imperative that you perform your own research about the pros, and cons of the specific social media applications, and what the benefits and potential dangers are. Are you ready to create your own account on the same social media site(s) to better hold the child accountable? McAfee found that while 90 percent of children "believe their parents trust them to do what is right online," almost half of them would still change their online behavior if they knew their parents were aware and watching.¹⁸ Do you have the discipline and courage to consistently set limits on their screen time, regularly confiscate their devices to review their posts, settings, and friend lists as 'par for the course' of using social media (most parents say they feel uncomfortable doing this)?

Have an ongoing, open discussion with children, and make sure you know what they're doing online. If you can't confidently say that you know exactly what they're watching, seeing and doing on the Internet, you may be putting the youth at risk as even websites for kids are sometimes hacked or even created with malicious intent, as shown by this recent [kid's channel YouTube fiasco](#).

While the caring adult is responsible for protecting the online identity of the child until the child can successfully navigate the Internet on his/her own, children must also learn how to assist in guarding their own content. Helping a child to protect their online presence, and also guarding the information yourself, will only serve to help children in the future as we become increasingly engaged with the Internet and social networking.

Hopefully you're modeling the appropriate behavior to the children in your role as a caring adult. It isn't just the job of the parent, it's the job of every caring adult and role model in each child's life—that means all of us.

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