

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND **SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS,  
CARERS & TEACHERS ABOUT  
**SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**



**Childnet**  
International

Social networking sites, such as **MySpace**, **Bebo** and **Facebook**, are very popular with children, even those as young as 8 and 9. These sites allow children to be incredibly creative online, keep in touch with their friends and express themselves using a whole range of different media and applications such as video, photos, music, and chat.

However, it's important to recognise that while these are fun and offer great possibilities for children, there are potential risks including **cyberbullying**, **contact by adults with a sexual interest in children** and **the misuse of personal information**.

**While most social networking sites stipulate a minimum user age of 13 or 14, users are often younger than this and as a parent, carer or teacher it's really important that you familiarise yourself with these services so that you can help to support your children in using them in a safe and constructive way.**

Social networking sites, alongside sites which enable users to put up their own pictures, text and videos (known as user-generated content) and blogging sites, are part of a social and technological revolution that is known as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is characterised by the ease with which anyone can produce and publish their own content and link with others.

Young people especially love this new environment because they can have a powerful voice to express their identity and opinions and many are using it to good effect. For example, some musicians and bands have launched themselves entirely on the strength of this new stage. And all this is for free and with just one password – is it any wonder why young people love it?



# PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SOCIAL LIFE?

What sometimes appears as a private space for a child can become public very quickly and this blur between public and private expression can potentially put a child at risk in two main ways:

## CONTENT:

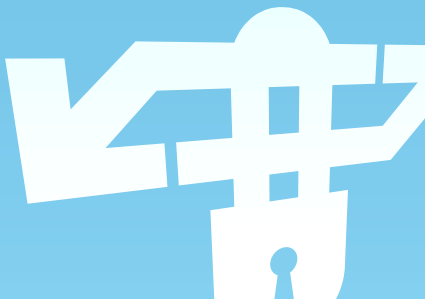
Children creating or posting inappropriate, offensive or even illegal content in their or others' Web pages could get them into trouble with their school, friends, and even the police, depending on the nature of the material. Content posted to the Web can be copied, altered and reposted by anyone and it's very difficult to 'take back' what may be later regretted. This can damage reputations as well as future prospects.

## CONTACT:

Children can also put too much personal information in these sites, exposing their information to adults with a sexual interest in children. Posting or chatting about personal details might enable someone to identify and contact your child online or in person. There is also the more likely risk of cyberbullying with young people intentionally harming another person online.

It is not easy talking to a young person about their social networking online or offline. Young people often think of these sites as their private domain, in much the same way as they would a personal diary and address book.

However because of the public nature of this environment and because young people have been hurt by inappropriate behaviour in these spaces, it is important that they understand the risks and are able to safeguard themselves with the help and support of others.



Here are **5 Ps** that should be considered about social networking sites.

### 1. POSITIVE:

Stay positive about social networking sites – try to strike a balance between educating children and young people to behave safely and trusting them to get on with it. Get involved – ask them how to create a profile, get them to show you theirs and ask them to add you to their friends list!

### 2. PRIVACY:

Make sure that children know how to protect themselves on social networking sites through the tools provided. It's important to discuss the value of privacy with children. Encourage your child to keep their passwords private and work with them to check the privacy settings on their account which limit how much of their information can be seen by others – for example, encourage your child to change their settings to private so that only people they allow can see what they post and comment on their space, rather than public which leaves their site open to be viewed by anyone.

### 3. PHOTOS:

It's natural that children will want to include a photo on their site or profile, but help them think about the implications of posting photos and what is suitable. It is important to think about the type of picture and the kind of attention it might attract, the information it could divulge and who could see it. Suggest that your child ask permission of other people in the images that they post. Also, be aware that photos can be easily copied, changed, shared, used elsewhere, and can potentially stay online forever. One question to ask your child is “would they want a future employer to see this photo?”

### 4. POSTINGS:

The ability to interact with this media and comment on other people's sites is part of what makes these sites so attractive. However, make sure you help your child to think before they post. Set some ground rules about what is and isn't OK to say in a blog or profile. This relates to what the child says about others as much as about themselves. What starts off as a joke or gossip can quickly escalate to cause real pain which cannot be taken back.

### 5. POLICE:

It's really important that you encourage your child to tell you about inappropriate or illegal activity they may come across. If you suspect your child is being groomed by someone with a sexual interest in children, it's vital that you help them keep a copy of the offending images or messages and report them to the police via the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre website [www.ceop.gov.uk/reportabuse](http://www.ceop.gov.uk/reportabuse). If they are being harassed by another user, report that person's screen name to the SN provider which hopefully will act on violations to its terms of service.

# SMART RULES

Childnet has produced 5 key SMART rules which remind young people to be SMART online. It can be helpful to go through these tips with your children.

**S**

**SAFE:** Keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information, – such as your full name, e-mail address, phone number, home address, photos or school name – either to people you are chatting with online or by posting it online where other people can see it.

**M**

**MEETING:** Meeting someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. Only do so with your parents' or carers' permission and even then only when they can be present.

**A**

**ACCEPTING:** Accepting e-mails, IM messages, or opening files, pictures or texts from people you don't know or trust can lead to problems – they may contain viruses or nasty messages!

**R**

**RELIABLE:** Information you find on the internet may not be true, or someone online may be lying about who they are.

**T**

**TELL:** Tell your parent, carer or a trusted adult if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried, or if you or someone you know is being bullied online.

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## >> [www.childnet.com/blogsafety](http://www.childnet.com/blogsafety)

The Childnet International website gives internet safety advice and links for young people, parents, teachers and other organisations.



## >> [www.digizen.org/socialnetworking](http://www.digizen.org/socialnetworking)

A new report by Childnet providing teachers with a comprehensive guide to social networking services.



## >> [www.childnet.com/music](http://www.childnet.com/music)

Childnet's leaflet on Young People, Music and the Internet has concise information to help parents, carers and teachers get up to speed about online music and the legal issues raised when copyrighted music is used on social networking sites.



## >> [www.chatdanger.com](http://www.chatdanger.com)

Chatdanger is a site all about the potential dangers on interactive services online like chat, IM, online games, e-mail and on mobiles. Read true stories and find out how to chat safely.



## >> [www.connectsafely.org](http://www.connectsafely.org)

A US-based resource site and interactive forum where parents, teens, educators, and experts can discuss safety on the fixed and mobile social Web.



## >> [www.ceop.gov.uk](http://www.ceop.gov.uk)

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre's website houses a range of information on how to stay safe online. It includes a unique facility that enables parents and young people to make reports of actual or attempted abuse online.



## >> [www.inhope.org](http://www.inhope.org)

This site gives details of national child pornography hotlines in countries around the world.



This guide for parents has been written by the children's charity **Childnet International** in partnership with **Net-Family-News.org** and **SafeKids.com**. The views of this document are solely those of **Childnet**.

Childnet is a non-profit organisation working in partnership with others to help make the internet a great and safe place for children. Registered as a charity in the UK (No 1080173) See [www.childnet.com](http://www.childnet.com) for full details.

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