

Common Sense on Facebook

It has come to our attention that we are having an increasing amount of “unsavoury” Facebook incidents in recent months. These incidents are happening out of school hours, but are impacting on children back at school. In a recent ICT lesson we asked children in Grades 5 & 6 how many of them have Facebook and were alarmed by the large numbers who do. Facebook policy statement says that:

Facebook requires individuals to be at least 13 years old before they can create an account. In some jurisdictions, the age limit may be higher. Providing false information to create an account is always a violation of our Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. This includes accounts registered on the behalf of under 13 year old children by older parties.

If you are under age 13, please do not attempt to register for Facebook or provide any personal information about yourself to us. If we learn that we have collected personal information from a child under age 13, we will delete that information as quickly as possible. If you believe that we might have any information from a child under age 13, please contact us.

Educators believe that allowing a child under the age of 13 to have a Facebook account sets children loose in a digital world they may not be prepared for — exposing them to the real-life threats of inappropriate content, contact from strangers and the growing incidents of bullying by computer.

What is Facebook?

Facebook is an enormous, free social networking site with hundreds of millions of users all over the world. To use Facebook, you sign up with your email address, name, gender, date of birth, and password. That gives you a profile page, which you can then fill in by answering questions on Facebook’s forms. The questions are designed to help you create connections with people you know — called “Friends” — as well as display things you like, such as books and movies. You also have the option to upload a photo of yourself.

Facebook is not supposed to be used by people under 13. If Facebook discovers a user under 13, they will delete the profile.

In addition to displaying your profile information and likes, Facebook allows you do lots of other things, such as write “status updates” that tell others where you are and what you’re doing, play games, chat with others, comment on other people’s pages (called their “wall”), and more. You don’t need a computer to be on Facebook. You can view and update your page remotely from your smart phone or another mobile device.

Why it matters

Children feel a lot of social pressure to use Facebook. But kids can be cruel and will use any tool at their disposal to hurt, embarrass, or harass one another.

Parents often hear stories about kids misusing Facebook and become concerned that their children could get caught up in problems stemming from Facebook drama. The important thing for parents to know is that it’s not the site that’s a problem. It’s the way it’s used. That’s why talking to your kids about responsible online behaviour is so important.

That said, there are still safety and privacy issues to be aware of. Kids can post their actual, physical location, stating where they are and inviting friends to join them. Even friends who don’t have Facebook can be tagged to a location. Kids should disable this feature.

Facebook can also open children up to unwanted comments from both friends and non-friends, it can spark feuds that drag on and can carry over into real life, and it can become an obsession to the point where children fret about their online status. Perhaps the most worrying of all, it can expose photos, thoughts, and feelings that, once posted, are out of your child's control.

Kids using Facebook are creating a digital footprint that can live a long time online. And because kids can be impulsive, they are liable to say and do things on Facebook that they may later regret. It's easy for your child's friends to forward anything that's posted on your child's page — including instant-message conversations. What seemed important or funny in the moment may get kids into personal trouble now and professional trouble later.

Understanding Facebook privacy

On Facebook, your name and profile photo are always publicly viewable. That means other Facebook users can see your name and photo when they land on your page. You can limit who sees all of your other information, as well as who can write on your page by using Facebook's privacy settings. You can make your information viewable to Everyone, Friends of Friends, Friends Only. You can also limit who can see photos, status updates, comments, and more.

If your child has a Facebook page, sit down with them and review their privacy settings. But beyond that, discuss the importance of controlling your own information. Once your child posts something, it's out of their control and can be copied, pasted, or forwarded by other people.

By creating your own page and familiarizing yourself with Facebook's controls, you can help your child to use it responsibly and respectfully.

Tips for talking to kids about Facebook

»Talk to kids about controlling their information. Encourage them to be selective about what they post. But it's not just what they post that can get away from them. Their activities on Facebook, including the applications they use and games they play, can be viewed by others.

»Use privacy settings. Facebook's default settings tend to keep information public until a user makes it private. Review the settings with your child, and make sure they are set to "Friends Only."

»Disable location services. Facebook's Places feature lets users post their location. Kids can also "tag" their friends' location when they're together. These features can be — and should be — disabled in the privacy settings of kids' and teens' accounts.

»Set rules about what's appropriate to post. No photos of them doing something that could hurt them in the future. They also need to be thoughtful about their status updates, wall posts, and comments on friends' posts. Remind them that once they post something, it's out of their hands.

»Encourage kids to self-reflect before they self-reveal. Kids are very much in the moment and are likely to post something they didn't really mean. Work with them on curbing that impulse. Teach them to ask themselves why they're posting something, who will be able to read it, and whether it be misunderstood or used against them later.

»Watch out for ads. There are tons of ads on Facebook, and most major companies have profile pages. Marketers actively use Facebook to target advertising to your child.

»Create your own page. The best way to learn the ins and outs of Facebook is to create your own page. A great way to start talking to your kids about their Facebook experience is to ask them to help you create your own page.

»"Friend" your own child. It may be a sound policy to know what your child is posting, since kids that age don't necessarily understand that they're creating a digital footprint that will long outlast the passions of the moment.

»Be a good role model. Remember that they can see what you post, too. Model good behaviour for your kids and keep your own digital footprint clean.

The link below is a handy guide for parents who want more specific information on Facebook.

<http://www.connectsafely.org/pdfs/fbparents.pdf>