Social Networks

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversation with parents about social networking. Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the Social Networking parent tip video and hand out the Social Networking parent tip sheet to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions

1. Why do teens spend so much time on MySpace, Facebook, and similar sites?

2. Do social networking sites help teens develop social skills and build good relationships?

3. What are the benefits — and drawbacks — of these sites on teens' identity development?

4. What kind of information is okay — and not okay — for your teen to post on his or her profile?

5. What challenges or concerns have you experienced with your own children around social networking? How have you handled the situation? What worked? What didn't?

What would you do?

Stories to discuss, role play, and deepen conversation

Middle / high school teen

During the intermission of the school play, a group of parents get on the topic of MySpace and Facebook. One parent says, "My son checks his profile several times a day!" Another declares, "I know, it's ridiculous. And I don't like some of the revealing photos that my daughter puts up of herself and her friends on her profile — even if she's just trying to be cute." A father chimes in, "Yeah, they encounter more adult stuff than I'm comfortable with… about relationships and so forth… they should just enjoy being kids while they can." His spouse says, "Not to mention how mean they are to each other. In some of the posts I've seen, they insult each other or call someone fat or ugly! Oh, not to mention the kids they choose to put on their 'top friends' list and those they exclude — it's like a social status marker." A parent who joined the conversation late says, "Well, have any of you talked about this with your kids?" They all look at one another and say "NO!" and start laughing at themselves.

» Do any of these parents' comments resonate with you? How so?

» How can parents start conversations with their teens about these issues — even if some topics are uncomfortable to talk about?

common sense
media

Middle / high school teen

Thirteen-year-old Isaac recently created an account on Twitter. He tweets updates about his life pretty regularly — sharing what his mood is, giving shout-outs to friends, and responding to others' tweets with his opinions about different topics. Isaac knows that his Twitter page is open to the public, but he doesn't know that his parents check it every once in a while. One day, Isaac's Mom sees that he tweeted some information that made her a little uncomfortable: "Heading to Hawaii with the family from June 20th — June 28th! Aloha!"

» Why might Issac's mom feel wary about Issac's recent tweet?

» Have you had a conversation with your child about sharing private or personal information online? If so, what did you say? If not, what issues might you bring up?

» How might social networking sites be a constructive outlet for tweens' self-expression?

High school teen

Two parents argue over whether to let their ninth-grade daughter join Facebook. The daughter has been begging her parents to let her go on the site, and they're discussing whether to let her, now that she's 14. One argues, "It will be good for her. I heard it helps kids express who they are. Plus, all of her friends are on it, so she can talk with them — and learn how to talk with new people, too. I don't want her to be left out of the social loop now that she's in high school." The spouse disagrees, saying, "It's a complete waste of time! She can talk to her friends on the phone. Besides, do you know how many Internet predators stalk girls on that site, pretending to be their friends and then wanting to meet them in person? No way."

» Where do you stand? Are social networking sites a worthwhile experience for teens overall?

» What advantages would there be to letting your child of that age join Facebook? Are there ways you can help your child be safe on these sites?

High school teen

Seventeen-year-old Maria is really excited about the junior prom. Her parents have never met her date, and — although she's going with a group of couples — they're nervous about her being safe. Maria described her date as nice, funny, and a good guy. Without telling her daughter, Maria's mother went onto MySpace to look him up.. She found his MySpace profile (which was public). She saw some pictures where he appears to be drinking, as well as some posts and other content that were degrading to women. After seeing this, she feels really uncomfortable having this boy take Maria to the prom and has become even more worried.

» Should Maria's mom confront her daughter about what she saw on MySpace?

» Is it okay for parents to use profiles as a way to check up on their teens' friends or social life — especially if they're public?