



ASK DR. DANA

Q. How do you teach your children to navigate the social networking world?

A. I am worried about my kids navigating the social networking world. Not so much because of predators or overtly hurtful bullies, but more because there are far-reaching, obscure consequences of electronic messaging that youngsters have trouble comprehending. I won't try to stop the inevitable but it increases my parenting responsibilities exponentially. When I really think about teaching my daughters' to navigate the virtual world in addition to the real world, I feel overwhelmed and vulnerable. Social networking sites make my already big job, bigger.

Before they embark on virtual relationships I have to teach my daughters' about sharing private family information. I have read about children who unknowingly posted messages about their family's financial situation or other sensitive issues that got them in hot water. What they didn't realize was that, any and all, of this information can be spread rapidly in ways they haven't considered. A friend who sees your child's post tells another friend and away it goes. Instant communication is great and exciting except when it gets you in trouble.

What about when your child's friend posts pictures from a sleepover or party that your child wasn't invited to? What are the rules for that situation? What about when your child starts dating and the "break up" happens electronically and perhaps publically? What about when your child is eager to have the most "friends" and so they accept friends they have never met? Now these strangers have access to all of your child's information.

What about when your child goes on-line to play games and a virtual player starts befriending your child and asking for, at first innocent and then, private information? I was shocked to hear this even happens on Webkinz and Club Penguins' sites. Is that friendly penguin really an 8 year-old child?

As parents do we sit down with our children and go through every possible virtual scenario in an effort to prevent dangerous or hurtful situations? Can we possibly cover them all when they evolve and change on a weekly basis?

The answer has to involve interactive, daily communication or "checking in" with your child. When I suggest this, a common parental response is, "but my child won't talk to me—all she wants to do is go to her room and text!" Try an active listening approach and bite your tongue when you



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get the urge to ask too many questions. Teens tend to interpret these types of conversations as interrogations. Instead, I try to capitalize on those brief, daily chances to really listen even when she is talking about something I don't care much about (i.e., how Suzie wore the same jeans as Maddy). The content of the conversation doesn't matter as much as the fact that we are engaging.

Here is some great advice I have gotten from talking to other parents:

1. Require your child to "friend" you but agree not to comment on their site—be a passive observer, don't intrude unless you have to (i.e., you read something potentially dangerous or hurtful). This is much easier if you require this before they start using social networking sites.
2. Use others' social networking mistakes as teaching opportunities. Instead of instantly de-friending someone, use the opportunity to teach your child how the situation could have been handled differently. Explicitly explain what you expect your child to do in this situation and why? Emphasize your values and expectations.
3. Apply virtual situations (i.e., social excluding via Facebook) to the playground (i.e., being teased at school) so that your child can clearly see how they relate and what is unique about a virtual environment. This can start a conversation about social networking "do's and don'ts" and your expectations.

My oldest is only 9 so I will let you know if any of this actually works when she becomes a hormone-ridden teen.