

A Word About Social Networking

The Internet has significantly changed the way our society connects with one another, does business, and socializes. Today's youth have never known a world without the Internet, which is a piece of information adults must put into context when they think about and compare, generationally, social networking to face-to-face communications. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than 93% of both teens (12-17) and young adults (18-29) in the United States use the Internet regularly, and more than 70% use social networking sites. Furthermore, among online teens, 62% use the Internet to get news about current events and politics, 48% use it to make purchases (books, clothing, and music), and 31% use it to get health, dieting, or physical fitness information.

Online social networking presents both opportunities and risks. What follows is a cursory breakdown of both, followed by a series of lesson plans specifically targeting online safety.

ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

- **Social skills.** Social networking allows people to keep up with current friends and make new ones. When used in the right way, social media can increase self-esteem and help someone feel less isolated.
- **Independence and self-expression.** Creating your own “home page” allows people to express themselves and discuss their interests. They can join groups and support fan pages, and find out about other people’s interests.
- **Digital competence.** Technology is evolving faster than ever before. As teens and young adults learn to adapt to new technologies (or new applications of existing technologies), they will be better equipped to adapt to future technology.
- **Educational development.** Young adults in secondary and post-secondary education will often use social networking to discuss schoolwork and share discussions about assignments.
- **Research.** Young adults can gather information about topics that are hard to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health.
- **Additional advantages for youth with disabilities:** Social networking can open up a new world of communication, integration, and community participation. Young adults can express themselves, including their thoughts and feelings, more easily and without fear of the rejection or stigma they may experience in real life. Research also suggests that these young adults may be more willing to ask for help online than in face-to-face situations. Furthermore, young adults who experience difficulty with social skills can socialize anonymously, and can experiment with different personas and practice initiating and maintaining online friendships. They can also respond to others by taking advantage of having time to review and edit communications before sending it on. Ultimately, this skill may carry over into “real life” and give a sense of new courage to make and maintain friendships in everyday life.

RISKS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING:

- **Sharing one’s personal information with the wrong crowd.** Young adults need to be aware that information given out online could also put them at risk of victimization. People looking to do harm could use posted information to identify them or gain their trust. They can also be deceptive by pretending to know a young person. Encourage young people to privatize their online social networking accounts (such as Facebook and Twitter).
- **Bullying.** Harassment may occur online only (cyberbullying), or it may spill over to offline bullying committed by a person who has located his victim online. Cyberbullying can cause significant emotional harm resulting in depression, anger, school avoidance, violence, and suicide.
- **The permanency of online profiles.** Once information has been shared on the Internet, it’s out there – forever! Retrieving information that others have read and captured is nearly impossible. Inappropriate pictures, captions, and comments could come back to haunt youth as they start applying to colleges or looking for jobs.
- **Disclosure.** People tend to be far bolder and less discretionary with information shared online versus in person. This means there is a greater risk of giving out information including the presence of a disability that, given a second thought, we might not have wanted to disclose.
- **Additional potential risks for youth with disabilities:** Social networking may further isolate those who may already feel isolated or not included, and can ultimately lead to depression and loneliness. Also, young adults with disabilities must make important life decisions regarding disclosure of their disability (if, how, when, and to whom). Unintended disclosure is possible by posting pictures or becoming fans of disability support groups, for example. While this might not be an issue, it makes the “disclosure” discussion even more important. For more information on disability disclosure, see *The 411 on disability disclosure: A workbook for youth with disabilities* (available online at: <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/411-on-disability-disclosure>) and *Cyber Disclosure for Youth with Disabilities* (available online at: <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/cyber-disclosure>).

The process of empowering youth to make safe and responsible decisions online can be compared to the process by which they may have learned to safely cross the street. First they hold hands with an adult, and then they gain a little more independence and might be watched from afar. Ultimately, they become capable of making safe and responsible decisions on their own. Educating youth about social networking communities must be grounded in the providing of knowledge, skills, and values so that eventually they can be expected to independently exercise good judgment.

Cyber Resource: CyberSmart!

CyberSmart! is a free curriculum and part of Common Sense Media's education programs. Common Sense will be updating the CyberSmart! lesson plans and adding video, interactive components, and a rich complement of parent resources to create an integrated K-12 Digital Literacy and Citizenship curriculum.

YOUR ONLINE IMAGE

http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/safetysecurity/lessons/9-12/your_online_image/

Students explore the consequences of unintended audiences viewing their social network profiles. They consider four key characteristics of social networking sites and how they might affect teens as they try out new identities. Then, students collaborate to write a letter to parents demonstrating their understanding of issues related to unintended online audiences.

MAKING GOOD DECISIONS

http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/safetysecurity/lessons/9-12/making_good_decisions/

Students take a true/false quiz about the risks to teens regarding online sexual victimization by adults. They use an analysis of the results as the basis for a classroom discussion of how they can harness the power of the Internet while avoiding risky behavior that can lead to involvement in criminal sexual activity.

ACCEPTABLE SOCIAL NETWORKING

http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/safetysecurity/lessons/9-12/making_good_decisions/

Students explore a scenario in which an angry student creates a false online identity in order to seek revenge. They explore ways to resolve the situation and develop a list of tips to help other teens avoid cyberbullying situations.

CONNECTED 24/7

http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/cyberbullying/lessons/9-12/connected_247/

Students explore how bullying behaviors on social networking sites and cell phones can affect teens around the clock. They identify positive actions that bystanders can take to alleviate a particular scenario. Then they write a letter to the editor discussing the positives and negatives of social networking sites, messaging, and cell phone technologies used by teens.

And From the Office of Disability Employment Policy:

CYBER DISCLOSURE FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/cyber-disclosure>

A supplement to The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities, this publication focuses on the advances in technology that have changed what youth need to know about disability disclosure.