

Common Sense on Protecting Online Privacy

What is online privacy?

Kids live in a world where everyone and everything is connected. Once kids put something on the Internet, they lose control over that information. Text messages, comments, videos and pictures can be copied and sent to millions of people in a second. All this information can last a long time. So protecting your child's online privacy means more than just being careful with personal information like a phone number or address.

Why does privacy matter?

Everything we do online leaves a trail. This trail, called a digital footprint, is made up of bits of pieces of information that allow other people to learn about us. The trail can last a long time. For example, if a kid puts a silly or racy photo of himself on the Internet, someone could find it later.

This means your child's reputation can be affected by what she posts online. Kids' deepest secrets can be shared with thousands of people they have never even met.

There are other problems with trying to control privacy. Many phones and programs have GPS (Global Positioning System). GPS identifies the exact location of the person using the cell phone. Kids can use the GPS information to tell their friends where they are and find their friends when they go out. Some phones let you identify the location of the pictures you take on your phone. And kids can post these photos to the Internet, identifying themselves, their family, their address, and other private information.

Another problem: companies sometimes use this information to send your child advertisements.

What can parents do?

- » **Remind your children to think before they put something online.** Remind them that this is their reputation. Someone else could use online information to hurt or embarrass them.
- » **Teach kids to keep personal information private.** Help kids decide what information is important for them to keep private when they are online. We recommend that kids do not share their addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.
- » **Make sure your kids use privacy settings on their social network pages.** When they use sites like Facebook or MySpace, help your kids identify their close friends, family, acquaintances and then fix their privacy settings appropriately.
- » **Remind kids to protect their friends' privacy.** When they pass a rumor or identify someone in a picture (called “tagging”), privacy is affected. If your kids are tagged in friends' photos, they can ask to have the photos or the tags removed. But there's not too much they can do beyond that.
- » **Create a few hard-and-fast rules about posting.** Tell your kids that there will be no nude or semi-nude photos or videos ever — not online, not on a cell phone (known as “sexting”), no pictures of doing drugs, drinking, or having sex.
- » **Remind kids that the Golden Rule is true for the Internet, too.** What goes around comes around. If kids spread a rumor or talk badly about anyone, they can't assume that what they say will stay private. Whatever they say can come back to hurt them.
- » **Help kids think long term.** Everything leaves a trail on the Internet. It's like a track in cement, but it is online. Whatever is created may never go away. If your kids don't want to see it tomorrow, they should not post it today.

Let's review.

Help kids manage their online privacy.

- » Review their privacy settings on the social networks they use — and make sure the controls are strict.
- » Explain to kids that everything they post online can be viewed by anyone and last a long time.
- » Remind kids to think before they tell the world something.
- » Be aware and limit use of social-mapping programs that let kids post where they are.
- » Train kids in responsible behavior, like not posting or forwarding other people's information without permission.

