

8 Dangers of Social Media to Discuss with Kids and Teens

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Social media and kids. Gah! Is there anything more terrifying for a parent? From cyberbullying to online predators, it seems like the dangers of social media for children are endless. Here's the thing, though: It isn't Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook that should be keeping you up at night.

“On its own, social media is not dangerous,” says Lori Getz, a cyber education consultant and author of ["The Tech Savvy User's Guide to the Digital World."](#) “It's the manner in which it's used that can be the problem.”

Concerned about the risks of social media for your phone-obsessed kid? Experts offer safety tips for eight common dangers of social media.

Danger #1: Sharing too much

While it certainly isn't advisable for kids to post information about the school they attend or their upcoming whereabouts, typically speaking, online predators work in much more nefarious ways

than showing up at a given location they found out about online (more on that in a bit). On the other hand, identity thieves thrive on knowing the everyday details of people's lives, as they can offer more info than posters realize.

“Identity thieves love social media because people talk about their pets, their hometown, their favorite sports teams, etc., which are all usually the answers to security questions and passwords,” says Getz. “It’s very easy for somebody looking on social media to steal someone else’s identity just by paying attention to the things they say and do.”

Expert advice:

Make sure kids aren’t sharing too many details online — even if they seem innocuous, because over a period of time, details can offer insight into a bigger picture. (For instance, if the world knows your child’s birthday and their dog’s name, they may also know their email password.)

“This goes for commenting on friends’ pages, as well,” says Getz.

It’s also important to always check photos for background information that may be revealing, such as credit cards, a driver’s license or report cards. Additionally, Getz recommends all family members refrain from posting about vacations on social media.

“When you broadcast that you’re going away, you’ve just let everybody know there’s no one in your house,” she says. “It’s like putting a giant sign on the front door that says: ‘Empty! Come on in!’ It’s just a bad habit.”

If the urge to sneak in a selfie is too much to resist, make sure the location isn’t tagged and there isn’t anything too telling in the background.

“Even if you don’t tag where you are when you’re on vacation, if the Eiffel Tower is in the background, everyone knows there’s no one in your house,” says Getz.

Pro tip: Wait until after your vacation to post all of those jealousy-inducing pics.

Danger #2: Assuming private means safe

While having accounts set to private will offer some level of protection, the truth is, it isn’t much.

“Kids think that when they use social media, they’re safe if they set it to private,” says Getz. “But when they accept the requests of friends of friends, mutual friends, people they may know and people they played games with, it’s a different issue. Privacy equals control, and when a child posts a picture or a comment, they need to remember that they’re transferring control of that thought, feeling, special moment or image to all of the people that they are sharing it with, and there’s nothing to stop followers and friends from sharing it with others or even turning it into an embarrassing meme.”

Expert advice:

Make sure kids know all of their followers personally — and even then, remind them to be mindful of what they post. There's no delete button on the internet, and anything from a risqué photo to a distasteful "joke" can come back to haunt them in terms of future job opportunities, relationships and general well-being.

"To emphasize the staying power of the internet, parents can find a story where a person had a negative social media experience due to posting something inappropriate when they were younger and how it affected their future," says psychotherapist Ali Hamroff, of Liz Morrison Therapy in New York.

Love146, an international human rights organization working to end child trafficking, recommends kids ask themselves the [following questions](#) before posting:

- "Is this something I would say or do face-to-face?"
- "Would I be OK with this photo/quote of mine being posting in the school hallways?"

Danger #3: Connecting with a predator

There are some serious creeps on the internet.

"Cyber-predators don't just see a child online and then look for their address and go take them," says Getz. "That's a predator of opportunity. Internet predators are predators that groom. They cultivate relationships with a child online and then have the child come to them, so they don't have to take the risky approach of locating the child to abduct them."

Expert advice:

It's important for kids to know that it's completely unacceptable to cultivate relationships with strangers online — and even more dangerous is hiding an online connection from their parents.

"Parents need to tell their kids that if someone is important to them, they are important to the parent, too, no matter where the child met them," says Getz. "If a child is hiding a relationship they're cultivating online, they already know it's something their parents would not approve of — or it's possible someone is grooming them and convincing them to keep the relationship secret."

It's also important to note that strangers attempt to lure kids not only on social media platforms but in gaming environments, as well. Getz recommends reminding kids that if they're chatting with another player who is asking them questions that have nothing to do with the game, that's a red flag.

"In most gaming systems, you can block a player, but, depending on the situation, that may or may not be the right move," she says. "For instance, if it's a friend of a friend asking off-topic questions, a comment like, 'Let's just concentrate on the game' should suffice."

In any case, it's a good idea for parents to periodically check in with kids while they're playing games and to always have open lines of communication.

“The hope is that a child feels comfortable enough to tell their parents when someone is asking them questions that aren't related to the game, so they can help decide the best course of action based on the situation,” Getz says. “This way, parents are teaching their kids that while not all people are bad, you never know another person's intentions. It's about being smart.”

Danger #4: Allowing your child to get on social media too early

The national campaign Wait Until 8th suggests parents refrain from giving their children phones until they're in eighth grade and access to data until they're 16, given the potential, negative emotional and developmental effects of smartphone and social media use for children who are younger. Wait Until 8th points to the following study-proven reasons to wait:

- They interfere with school work and grades.
- They're addictive.
- They're preventing kids from getting outside and having real-life interactions.
- They increase anxiety and depression.
- They interfere with sleep.
- They can expose kids to sexual content.

Expert advice:

“I always encourage parents to put off children's use of social media for as long as possible,” says Sean Grover, a New York City psychotherapist and author of “[When Kids Call the Shots](#),” who supports the Wait Until 8th initiative. If you do allow your child to have social media early on, Grover recommends having all the passwords and access to the accounts in order to monitor their behavior while they learn how to properly use and navigate the internet.

Danger #5: Not having clear-cut phone rules

Regardless of when you give your child a phone, you want to restrict their use on it to avoid the issues above. Furthermore, drawn-out rules should be put in place from the get-go to avoid power struggles and arguments.

“When we first gave my son his phone, we didn't lay out any ground rules,” says Jennifer Vaccaro, of Hillsborough, New Jersey. “He was on it all the time! Eventually, we needed to rein it in, and he wasn't happy at all. We should have done it right off the bat.”

Expert advice:

Have a binding agreement.

“I recommend that every family has a technology contract that provides structure and family limits around the use of screens,” says Grover. “For instance, there should be tech-free zones in the house that everyone respects. There shouldn’t be cell phones during meals, limited cell phone use on vacations and tech blackouts around bedtime. The more parents and children follow these guidelines together, the less resistance parents will face from their kids.”

For parents’ convenience, Grover has a [screen time contract](#) template

Danger #6: Assuming you’re in the know if you’re ‘following’ your child

If kids don’t want you to see what they’re posting, they’ll find a loophole.

“Many kids get a ‘finsta’ account [a blend of the words “fake” and “Instagram”] in order to stop their parents from seeing certain information,” says Getz.

While their specially curated, secondary “finsta” account — the one their parents and older relatives have access to — will contain content and photos mom and dad will approve of, that may not be the case with their primary, “real” (or “rinsta”) Instagram account.

Expert advice:

According to Getz, making sure the lines of communication are always open and having children use their device in a public space (where you can parent over their shoulder from time to time) are potentially more effective strategies than “following” their social accounts.

However, if you have kids who are new to social media, you may want to follow them as they learn the ropes.

“While it might be somewhat embarrassing for kids to have their parents following them, it also will put into perspective what they are posting on social media, because they can ask themselves: ‘Would I want my mom or dad to see this?’” Hamroff says.

Pro tip: If you do decide to follow your child online, never chastise them in the comments.

“This is a surefire way to upset your child,” says Getz.

Danger #7: False marketing

Adults may be able to see through deceptive marketing tactics and bogus Instagram posts, but for kids, it’s not as easy.

“The content that is portrayed on social media and the internet often isn’t real, which can lead kids to believe in false realities,” Hamroff says. (Think skin that’s edited to look flawless and influencers who seem to be on a never-ending vacation.) “This can be extremely damaging for kids when they’re growing up and figuring out their self-identity and detrimental to their psychological development.”

Expert advice:

While you may not be able to shield your child from the latest supplement Kylie Jenner is taking, you can educate him or her on deceptive advertising. [Common Sense Media](#) recommends parents take the following steps:

- Identify advertisements with kids when you see them together.
- Make sure kids never click on forms or fill out ads without permission.
- Turn off their phone’s GPS to prevent them from getting targeting texts and messages.

Danger #8: Online bullying

Cyberbullying is a huge concern for most parents and with good reason: The effects of it are serious, sometimes even resulting in self-harm or suicide.

“Children’s identity and self-esteem are very fragile during early adolescence,” says Grover. “Online bullying, gossiping, verbally abusive language can send a teenager into a profound depression or spike their anxiety beyond their ability to manage it, resulting in panic attacks, phobias and obsessive-compulsive behaviors.”

Expert advice:

Nobody knows your child better than you, so be on the lookout for changes in their behavior. Difficulty sleeping, nervousness and an unwillingness to go to school may be signs your child is being cyberbullied, according to the National PTA. If you suspect your child is being bullied through social media, there are a few things you can do, including:

- Talking with them. Never turn a blind eye and hope they “figure it out” if you suspect your child is being cyberbullied.
- Explaining the difference between tattling and reporting — the latter being for much more serious circumstances.
- Reminding your child that you love and support them.
- Making sure they can recognize inappropriate behavior. On the front end, educate your child on bully behavior with the help of a resource like Pacer’s National Bullying Prevention Center.

And, again, never let your child’s screentime be completely unmonitored.

“It’s a parent’s role to protect children from toxic situations, and social media is no different,” says Grover, who has counseled hundreds of teens who were depressed from cyberbullying.

“Allowing kids to be exposed online without regulation could lead to devastating effect on a child’s sense of self, mood and identity.”

Additionally, make sure your child is never criticizing, teasing or attacking others online. [Stomp Out Bullying](#) highlights a few signs your child may be the cyberbully:

- They have a history of bullying.
- They refuse to have conversations about social media.
- They quickly close out windows on the computer when you walk by.
- They have multiple accounts within the same platform.

The main takeaway for parents, according to Grover: “Technology is a privilege that parents shouldn’t let their kids abuse.”