# TOWNSHIPS TODAY

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## Social Networking May be Great, But How Do You Keep Your Kids Safe?

They love them, and oftentimes it may seem as if your teen can't live without them.

Websites and apps, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and the prevalence of smartphones among kids have taken social networking to new levels.

You want your child to be safe, but it's challenging to keep up with this ever-changing technology. You may also feel like your child is much more Internet-savvy than you are. Still, as savvy as your teen may be, he or she may not be fully aware of the dangers of online networking and the precautions they need to take.

The following information from the National Crime Prevention Council will help you better understand social networking and talk to your teen about staying safe.

**When discussing social networking safety with your child, encourage him or her to always use discretion when posting photos, their location status, or messages. The message should be: Think before you post.**

### Social networking basics

Familiarizing yourself with the basic terminology used on most social networking sites will help you communicate effectively with your teen about the topic. Here are a few words you'll hear often:

**Post —** A message that notifies friends and followers about what you are doing or thinking.

**Tag —** To label friends in a photo and link to their profile pages. People who are "tagged" can then decide whether to stay linked to the comment, video, or photo.

**Wall —** The area on your profile where the user and their friends can post their location, comments, pictures, or other information.

**Places —** This feature allows a user to post his or her location. This information is then shared with the user's friends and followers.

**Friend request —** A person interested in being a "friend" on social media will send a request, which the user can either accept or deny. ➤

**Blocking —** This action prevents another user from accessing your personal profile. You can block someone temporarily or permanently.

**Hacker —** Someone who breaks into computers or computer networks to gain access to the owner's personal and financial accounts. Some may also create false profiles or pose as another user.

The four major dangers of using social networking websites and apps are:

• **Oversharing information —** When creating a profile page, most social networking sites will ask for personal information, such as a home address, birth date, and phone numbers. If the page's privacy settings aren't set correctly, this information will be made public to anyone who visits the user's profile page. Keep in mind that even if the account settings are set to the strictest privacy settings, users are still at risk of having their accounts hacked.

If someone hacks into an account, he will be able to view and use the information that's there. Simple things, such as sharing your favorite color or your pet's name, can tip off a hacker to potential passwords.

The biggest threat of oversharing, though, is identity theft, which can happen in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. An obvious way would be someone asking for a Social Security number. A not-so-obvious way is luring a user to click on a link that allows the criminal to download the user's personal information. The anonymity provided online makes it easier for computer criminals to go undetected.

• **Falling for a fake identity —** Social networking sites make it very easy to pretend to be someone else. Also, anyone can take control of a user's account if they learn the password. Therefore, teens need to be cautious when giving out information.

For example, your teen may get a message from a relative asking for banking information to wire him birthday money. While the teen may think he's talking to a relative, the information is really being requested by someone who has hacked into the relative's account.

• **Sharing your location —** Social media sites allow users to tag who they are with and where. While it can be fun for a teen to share his/her location with friends and family, it can also increase their vulnerability, potentially opening them up to being robbed, sexually assaulted, or worse. Predators can use this tool to track your teen's movements and determine when he/she is alone.

• **Posting photos —** Social media users can post photos 24 hours a day. Keep in mind, though, that photo editing tools allow people to manipulate online images in any way they choose, whether for good or bad purposes. While posting photos and sharing them with friends can be fun, it can also be risky.

## Think before you post

When discussing social networking safety with your child, encourage him or her to always use discretion when posting any type of photo, location status, or message. Urge your teen to think before they post and ask these questions:

• Should I share this? Will the information put me or someone else in danger?

• Do people really need to know where I am and who I am with? In other words, is it a good idea to let everyone know my exact location?

• Am I selecting friends online that I can trust? Always keep in mind that it's not always about what you post but how others may use that content.

• Does the post give out too much personal information?

In addition, encourage teens to follow these three simple safety tips:

***1) Don't provide optional information.*** When creating a profile, it's not necessary to enter all of the requested information. The set-up page usually requires users to fill out basic information, such as their name and email. Everything else is optional. Users should not feel obligated to include their address and telephone number.

***2) Don't be an open book.*** Social media profiles can be set to one of three levels of privacy: "open to everyone," "open to friends of friends" and "friends only," which is the strictest level of security. This setting ensures that only the people your teen has accepted as a friend can view his or her information.

***3) Do accept "friends" — but only people you know.*** A great way to ensure social networking safety is to accept only people your teen knows as friends. This will help to protect your teen from spammers, pedophiles, and others who use social networking sites to commit crimes.

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Having a discussion with your teen about social media can ease some anxiety about your child's safety. Social networking sites help all of us stay connected to family and friends. However, it's important to make sure your child knows how to be safe while online.

For more information on social networking safety, visit the National Crime Prevention Council's website, **www.ncpc.org.**

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