



# Center for Youth and Family

## Handling Social Media with Your Kids

by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the past few years, you're aware of the rise in popularity of social media with teens. From texting on cell phones to websites such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, today's kids are engaging in social media at an ever-increasing rate.

I probably don't have to say this, but the reality is that social media is not a fad—it has become part of the fabric of American youth culture. It's estimated that during this year (2009), 15.5 million teen Internet users (75 percent) will use social networking websites. Facebook alone is said to have 300 million active users worldwide, and is the third most-visited website on the Internet, behind Google and Yahoo! In the course of one month, 24 percent of all Internet users visit Facebook. And, two other social media sites, YouTube and MySpace, hold the fourth and fifth spots as most visited websites in the U.S.

Still, parents have to make choices about whether they will allow their adolescent kids to use these websites. And, if they allow their kids access to these sites, parents must provide both boundaries and oversight to their usage. Talking to your kids about social media should be a top priority. Here are some of my thoughts on handling social media in your home.

### Understand Why Today's Kids Use Social Media

When we were teenagers and couldn't hang out face-to-face with our friends, phones were the communication tools of the day. Today's teens now have many social media options, such as social networking websites, instant messaging, and using cell phone text messaging. Our kids find these options more to their liking than talking on the phone. They can multitask better via online methods, communicate briefly, and can't be overheard by their parents.

Also, it's been suggested that due to parents' safety concerns in today's culture, many kids don't have the freedom to hang out with peers in settings that were common for us when we were teens. As a result, kids use social media, where they can hang out "virtually" with their peers to socialize, chat, and share their thoughts.

When it comes to video, today's teens don't have to sit in front of a television for their entertainment. Social media websites such as YouTube, Hulu, and others, make it possible for kids to watch what they want, when they want on their computers and cell phones. On these sites, they can watch, download, comment, and share videos virally with others, and even upload their own videos. More and more, teens are turning to social media to get their entertainment fix.

### Understand the Dangers of Social Media

#### *Just a Click Away: Mature and Inappropriate Content*

Although it is possible for kids to have a safe and positive experience using social media, understand that dangers lurk close by. It's important to know that kids are always a click or two away from content that you don't want them to view. By 2011, it's estimated that the Internet will be the number one distributor of pornography. It's not a stretch to say that if your kids are online, they will be exposed to porn (even if accessed unintentionally). The number one demographic for new users of Internet pornography are teenage males, ages 11 to 17. If I were a teen today, I don't know if I could avoid the temptation of viewing online pornography. The dangers abound. My fear is that many of today's teens will end up on the road to porn addiction.

### ***Predators on the Prowl***

Because of the veil of anonymity afforded by social media, some sexual predators pose as imposters, giving false information about their age and identity, including criminal histories, in order to gain the trust of “friends.” They quite simply pretend to be someone that they are not. Beyond this, recent research indicates that most predators are actually up front in engaging their victims online. They just search for kids who are willing to interact with them. In fact, of the kids who are victimized by sexual predators, most willingly meet with the predator knowing that they are interested in sex. Kids who engage in at-risk behaviors “offline” also turn out to be the most at-risk online.

### ***Experimenting***

Many kids use social media to experiment with their social skills. The online atmosphere emboldens kids to communicate in ways that they would not when in face-to-face conversation, or to engage in behaviors that they typically would not. Sexual comments, “sexting” (taking semi-nude, nude, or other provocative photos for distribution via the Internet or cell phones, as well as receiving and forwarding them to others), criticisms, rants, and even cyber-bullying are all commonly found in social media venues.

### **Set Appropriate Boundaries and Provide Intentional Oversight for Social Media**

#### ***• Follow website rules and safety tips, and set privacy settings.***

If you allow your kids to have access to social media, be sure to follow the rules and tips provided on specific websites. Additionally, when setting up a social networking account, be sure to access the security settings area, click on “privacy settings” and then set the desired settings to make sure your child’s profile is private, allowing only designated “friends” access to their profile.

#### ***• Set-up a closed circle of “friends.”***

On social networking websites, only allow your kids to designate as “friends” people whom they know and of whom you approve. This will only allow your kids to communicate only with a specific, closed group of people.

#### ***• Don’t allow kids to add new “friends” without your permission.***

It’s likely that over time, your children will want to add additional “friends” to their social networking profile. Also, understand that it’s likely that your children will receive requests from people they don’t know to be added to their “friend” list. Set an expectation that no person can be added to the “friend” list without your permission.

#### ***• Don’t allow your kids to provide any personal information.***

Don’t allow kids to post any information that would make it easy for a stranger to find them, including addresses, phone numbers, where they regularly hang out, where they work, and what time they get off work.

#### ***• Don’t allow kids to set up multiple profiles using multiple email accounts.***

From the beginning, set the expectation that your child is allowed only one account on a social networking website. Make sure your child understands that a violation of this expectation is cause for disciplinary action.

#### ***• Make it clear that you intend to be a “friend” and will regularly check your child’s profile.***

Your child will likely balk at this rule, as he or she will want their profile to be private, free from a parent’s view. Don’t give in. This will serve a couple of good purposes, both to ensure your children think through what to post on their profile before they do so, and it also gives you the opportunity to view the content that others post on the profile as well. Be sure to follow through. “Friend” your child and visit their profile frequently.

- ***Have your kids agree to tell you if they receive any inappropriate or threatening messages.***

The possibility exists that your child will receive uninvited, inappropriate, or threatening messages from others. So, set the expectation that you need to know if this occurs so that you can deal with these messages.

- ***Set clear expectations about cell phone use.***

These expectations should include all issues associated with today's cell phones, from when it's okay to talk on their cell phone, to texting, to taking and distributing photos and videos. Tell your kids that if they should receive inappropriate photographs from others, you expect them to notify you.

- ***Set clear expectations about video websites.***

Your kids need to know what you expect when it comes to visiting social media sites such as YouTube. Determine what types of video they can view and which ones they cannot. Understand that you probably won't be able to tell what videos they've watched, particularly if they access video through their phone or when they are away from home with their friends. So, if you set clear expectations, at least your kids will have to make a choice knowing where you stand. Make sure they know that should they come across video of a pornographic nature, that you're willing to talk it over with them.

- ***Follow through with consistent discipline.***

Kids need consistent discipline from their parents in order to both survive and thrive. That means clearly defined limits, expectations, and consequences clearly articulated to the children by the parents in ways that all involved parties understand. If your kids violate your boundaries, it's key to follow through consistently with the agreed upon consequences.

Social media is here to stay. How your child consumes it can impact her or his life for better or for worse. Be proactive by providing loving guidance and discipline. And be sure to throw in good measures of patience and grace. In doing these things, you'll be helping your child grow into a mature and responsible adult.

*Azusa Pacific University's Center for Youth and Family with Jim Burns, Ph.D., serves as a research and training institute dedicated to providing biblically-based resources for parents and youth to help build healthy families.*