

Be Safe Online

Email, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, and social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook are great. They can help you meet and communicate with people all over the world. You can make new friends, but you might also meet some people who can be dangerous to you, who steal your identity, or damage your computer. The U.S. Bureau of Consumer Protection offers these suggestions to help you be safe online:

- Think about how different online sites work before deciding to join a site. Some sites will allow only a defined community of users to see posted information such as profiles, blogs, and photos; others allow anyone and everyone to see everything.
- Keep some control over the information you post. Allow only certain groups of people to see what you post, for example, your friends from school, your club, your team, your community groups, or your family.
- Keep your information private. Don't post your full name, Social Security number, address, phone number, or bank and credit card account numbers — and don't post other people's information, either. Be careful about posting information that could be used to identify you or locate you offline. This could include the name of your school, sports team, clubs, and where you work or meet friends.
- Make sure your screen name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your name, your age, or your hometown. It can be very easy for someone to look at all the information from your site together and learn who you are.
- Be careful what you post. Many people can see your page, including your parents, your teachers, the police, the college you might want to apply to next year, or the job you might want to apply for in five years.
- Remember that once you post information online, you can't really remove it completely. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.
- Do you really want to post your photo? It can be changed and broadcast in ways you may not like. If you do post a photo, choose it carefully. What would your mother or father think about this photo?
- Flirting with strangers online could be dangerous. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you are chatting with.
- Be careful if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. Before you decide to meet someone, do your research: Ask whether any of your friends know the person, and see what background you can find through Google or other online search engines. If you decide to meet a new online friend, meet in a public place, such as a coffee shop, during the day, and bring a friend you trust with you. Tell someone where you are going and when you plan to return home.
- If a situation online makes you feel uncomfortable or afraid, tell someone who can help you. Maybe you should report it to the police and the social networking site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.

Adapted from "Social Networking Sites: Safety Tips for Tweens and Teens"

Online: <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm>

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