

## Social networking sites: Easy, fun, but safety—and limits—are musts



Just as our heavenly Father patiently teaches us, He blesses us with the wisdom to share His Word with our children. A world with computers may be a little bit more complicated, but even a social networking site is an opportunity to share the love of God.

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE CURRENT AGE INVOLVES MUCH MORE THAN MAKING A GUEST LIST FOR A BIRTHDAY PARTY AND LEARNING HOW TO TAKE GOOD NATURED TEASING ON THE PLAYGROUND. SOCIAL SKILLS NOW INVOLVE THE INTERNET, WEB SITES, PHOTOS, FAN CLUBS, AND “WHAT CARTOON CHARACTER ARE YOU?” QUIZZES. PARENTS HAVE TO BE EXPERTS IN CYBER SAFETY.

As we head into the summer, our children will have more free time and they will spend some of that time on the Internet. Today’s children cannot imagine a life without Google, and connecting with friends via the World Wide Web is just second nature to them. Just as we wouldn’t consider sending them on their bicycles without protection and safety guidelines, we also need to prepare them for safe surfing on the computer.

Social networking sites allow each member to have a Web page, update that page, and control who sees what’s posted. They are a fun way to communicate with others and connect with friends who live far away. For adults, they are an easy way to connect with people from your past. For everyone, they are a way to share what happens in your life and show a bit of your personality.

### The downside

For children, computer time should not replace time spent with people. Important emotional development happens when children interact with each other and with

adults. This does not happen as well through a computer screen. There also are risks of cyberbullying on social networking sites. It is a good idea to closely monitor the messages your child sends and receives, just as you would monitor friendships. Social networking sites can also give a false sense of security. You do have some measure of control over who sees your site and what information is available. However, these sites are not fool-proof. They give the same illusion of security as credit cards. When used sensibly, they are safe. When safety is ignored, the results can be devastating. Monitor your child’s use of social networking sites.

### The upside

Networking sites are fun and a source of entertainment that involves reading and writing. Working with them involves thinking, planning, and some level of creativity, which are skills that transfer to other learning. High school and middle school teachers use such sites to promote class discussion.

Social networking sites are not recommended

for children under the age of 11 or 12. Children this age are in strong need of face-to-face time with peers and should spend limited time in front of the computer, which hinders many necessary thinking skills. A family account handled by parents could be a compromise for children this age, who really feel the need to communicate with friends this way.

Middle school-age children, with healthy social skills, are probably ready for a social network account. Monitor and limit time spent on the computer. Do not allow social networking to replace real-time contact with friends or adults. Here are some recommendations:

■ Never reveal information like age, gender, birth date, phone numbers, address, e-mail addresses, social security numbers, and the school or church your child attends on a social network site or in a chat room.

■ On a social network site, others “ask” to be your friend and do not have access to your site until you grant it. It can, however, be a game for children to see how many “friends” they can collect. This can cause them to be casual about people they add to their list. Your child should have your permission to add a friend, or to be added as a friend, and should not connect with people she has not already met face to face.

■ Parents should have their own account and be on their child’s friend list so they can check often and monitor what goes up on the site. Be aware that your child can easily set up a second account.

■ After you have experimented with the social network account, it is time to set up rules and guidelines about what your child will be able to use. There are many different groups and applications. Many are harmless fun, others lead to objectionable material.

■ When you find objectionable mate-

rial, or when friends make inappropriate comments, you have a great opportunity to teach your child how to discern. In some cases you may need to “unfriend” someone; in other cases, you and your child might find a way to respond with a gentle witness to faith and values. The McGruff site listed below has an interactive game that gives your child the opportunity to try different replies to cyberbullying. These scenarios will also give you an opportunity to talk to your child about how his or her comments could hurt others.

■ Help your child understand that social network sites are not good ways to resolve conflict. While teenagers are famous for sarcastic comments, expressing anger over the behavior of another person by making comments on your site is inappropriate, ineffective, and rude. Teach your child that conflicts need to be resolved face-to-face.

■ As your child begins to decorate his or her site with photos or other applications, you have another good opportunity to teach about expressing the values of your shared faith. If you wouldn’t want your grandparents to see the picture, then it probably shouldn’t go up on your site.

■ Social network sites give your child a new freedom, which comes with new responsibility. An account can be a great way for your child to show how well he or she makes decisions around friends. Or it can be a great way for your child to show how well he or she makes decisions regarding self-expression. If the freedom is abused, then it is best to put restrictions into place. When freedom is used carefully, lift the restrictions.

■ Don’t let social networking, chat rooms, or instant messaging become your child’s whole life. Playing games and communicating on the computer can be fun, but children of all ages need physical activity and live interaction in order to grow and develop. If the computer takes all your

child’s free time, you will need to impose restrictions and make suggestions for other activities.

“You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (DEUT. 11:19)

Teaching our children about God’s love and God’s will is a 24/7 job. We can share our faith with our children when we pray with them, in church, during devotions, and with discipline. We have the opportunity and responsibility to teach our children about the faith God gave them, even when using modern technology. Just as our heavenly Father patiently teaches us, He blesses us with the wisdom to share His Word with our children. A world with computers may be a little bit more complicated, but even a social networking site is an opportunity to share the love of God.

## For Discussion:

- ▶ How does your child use a social network account?
- ▶ How much time does your child spend checking the account?
- ▶ Do you have a plan in place to respond to inappropriate use of the account?
- ▶ How much do you know about how to use a social network account?

## For Further Study:

- ▶ <http://tinyurl.com/2z9got>  
“Social Networking Sites: Safety Tips for Tweens and Teens”
- ▶ <http://tinyurl.com/me444q>  
“Kids Privacy”
- ▶ [www.mcgruff.org](http://www.mcgruff.org)  
This McGruff site has great information and games.