

BLOG SAFETY



KEEPING UP WITH
YOUR CHILD'S
ONLINE SOCIAL LIFE!



Childnet
International

A Childnet guide for Parents, Carers and Teachers

WELCOME TO THE NEW CRAZE OF BLOGGING & SOCIAL NETWORKING

If you have heard your child speak about websites like MySpace, Bebo or Piczo, then welcome to the new craze of blogging and social networking.

A blog is short for web log or online journal, and websites like MySpace and Bebo are particularly appealing to young people because they make it extremely easy for them to create multimedia profiles online and develop social networks around them. Everyday thousands of young people and adults are joining these social network sites from all over the world.

As young people see it, it's the ability to hang out with friends online that makes these sites so great. They can personalise their own spaces with music, photos, videos, and graphics. They can express their tastes, feelings and opinions with all these media – among friends or to the whole world. It's like reality TV on the web that anyone can produce.





Blogging is part of a social and technological revolution that some people are calling Web 2.0. What's different about it is the ease with which anyone can produce and distribute their own content and link with like minded sites to create a very powerful network for sharing ideas and influencing opinion. Young people especially love this new environment because they can have a powerful voice to express their identity and opinions and are using it to good effect. For example, some musicians and bands have launched themselves entirely on the strength of this new stage. And all this is for free and with just one password. Is it any wonder why young people love it? Sending e-mail seems pretty dull by comparison.



But is this public environment safe for children and young people?

PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SOCIAL LIFE?

What sometimes appears as a private space for a child can become public very quickly. The issue for parents is that this blur between public and private expression can potentially put a child at risk in 2 main ways:

CONTENT:

Children creating or posting inappropriate, offensive or even illegal content in their spaces. This could get them into trouble with school, friends, and even the police, depending on the nature of the material. There is also the risk of children posting abusive comments to other people's spaces.

CONTACT:

Children can also put too much personal information in these sites, making themselves vulnerable to adults with a sexual motivation. Posting too many personal details might enable someone to identify and contact your child in person. There is also the more likely risk of cyberbullying with young people being involved in harassing or malicious activity online.

It is not easy talking to a young person about their social networking online or offline. So far young people have used these sites as their private domain, in much the same way as you would a personal diary and address book.

However because of the public nature of this environment and because young people have been hurt by inappropriate behaviour in these spaces, it is important that parents be involved.



One of the best ways is to ask them if they can show you their site or even add you as a contact on their buddy or friends list. If you can't – and who would want their dad or mum lurking in the background – at least discuss the issues with them.

Here are 5 Ps for personal safety that can help them think about the risks.

1. POSITIVE:

A positive outlook is a great place to start. There is a lot about social networking environments that is good and gives young people a chance to create their own original content and stay in touch with their friends. Yes, there are dangers, but it's important as a parent not to overreact and to appreciate why these sites are appealing. Young people are creating online profiles and blogs because they need a place to gather and interact with their peers. Try to strike a balance between educating them to behave safely and trusting them to get on with it.



2. PRIVACY:

It's important to discuss the value of privacy with your child. Work with them to check the privacy settings of the website provider (usually in Account Settings or Preferences). For example, encourage your child to be careful about who they allow to comment in their space. You don't want prowlers or bullies lurking in your child's neighbourhood. Encourage your child to keep their passwords private and be careful about sharing too much personal information on their site, especially anything which might help others to locate them in the real world.



3. PHOTOS:

It's natural that children will want to include a photo on their site but help them think about the implications of posting photos and what is suitable. It is important to think about the type of picture and the kind of attention it might attract, but also to be aware that photos can be easily copied, changed and used elsewhere, and can potentially stay online forever. Once they're posted you may be able to take it down, but they may already have been copied and shared by others. Inappropriate photos could make children vulnerable to attention and exploitation by adults with a sexual interest in children. There have also been instances where photos have been copied and distributed by peers to bully or harass and humiliate them. Some sites check for explicit images and remove them automatically and some are responsive to parents requesting that they delete a child's account. One question to ask your child about their photo is "Would they want a future employer to see this photo?"



4. POSTINGS:

The ability to comment on other people's sites and link to them is what makes these sites so attractive to young people. However, make sure you help your child to "think before they post". Set some ground rules about what is and isn't OK to say in a blog or profile. This relates to what the child says about others as much as about themselves. What starts off as a joke or gossip can escalate to real pain. What's great about chatting in these environments is that it's immediate, but you have to remember that you can't take back what you've said! Nasty or hurtful comments about others can end up being circulated round networks like wildfire and may come back to haunt them.



5. POLICE:

It's really important that you encourage your child to tell you about inappropriate or illegal activity they may come across. If you suspect your child is being groomed by someone with a sexual interest, it's vital that you help him or her keep a copy of the offending images or messages and report them to the police via the "virtual global task force" website www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com. If they are being harassed by another user, report that person's screen name to the SN provider which hopefully will act on violations to its terms of service. Insist that they remove porn, hate and violence, whether it has been created by your child or someone else.



PARENTS CAN DEVELOP THEIR OWN SOCIAL NETWORK!

This is a new environment and parents need to support young people by understanding the issues, guiding their children and learning from each other. We hope this guide has been a helpful introduction. If you want to find out how other parents are supporting their children using social networking sites you can join a unique parent's forum on Blog Safety linked from:

www.childnet-int.org/blogsafety



ALL THIS CREATIVITY
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SMART RULES

Childnet has produced 5 key SMART rules which remind young people to be SMART online. It can be helpful to go through these tips with your children.

S

SAFE: Keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information – such as your full name, email address, phone number, home address, photos or school name – to people you are chatting with online.

M

MEETING: Meeting someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. Only do so with your parents' or carers' permission and even then only when they can be present.

A

ACCEPTING: Accepting emails, IM messages, or opening files, pictures or texts from people you don't know or trust can lead to problems – they may contain viruses or nasty messages!

R

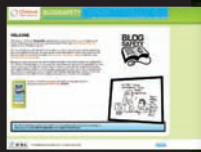
RELIABLE: Information you find on the internet may not be true, or someone online may be lying about who they are.

T

TELL: Tell your parent, carer or a trusted adult if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried, or if you or someone you know is being bullied online.

To find out why these rules are important see www.kidsmart.org.uk/yp/smart.

FURTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU



The Childnet International website gives internet safety advice and links for young people, parents, teachers and other organisations.

www.childnet-int.org/blogsafety



Childnet's Chatdanger website gives details about the potential dangers on interactive services like chat, IM, online games, email and mobiles.

www.chatdanger.com



Blogsafety has a unique parent's forum where you can discuss blogsafety issues with other parents from around the world.

www.blogsafety.com



The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre's website houses a range of information on how to stay safe online. It includes a unique facility that enables parents and young people to make reports of actual or attempted abuse online.

www.ceop.gov.uk



www.inhope.org which gives details of national hotlines in different countries.

This guide for parents has been written by the children's charity Childnet International in partnership with Net Family News and SafeKids.com. The views of this document are solely those of Childnet.

Childnet is a non-profit organisation working in partnership with others to help make the internet a great and safe place for children. Registers as a charity in the UK (No 1080173) See www.childnet-int.org for full details.

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