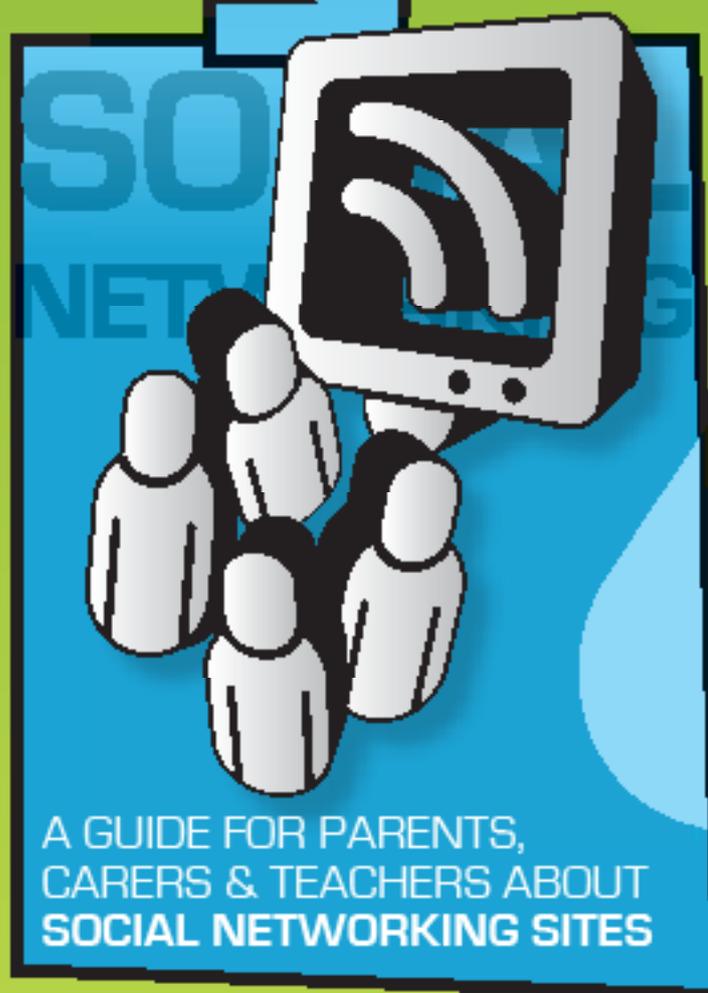


YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS,
CARERS & TEACHERS ABOUT
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES



Childnet
International

Social networking sites such as **Facebook**, **MySpace** and **Twitter**, are very popular with children, even those as young as 8 and 9. These types of sites allow children to be incredibly creative online, keep in touch with their friends and express themselves using a whole range of different media and applications such as video, photos, music, and chat.

However, it's important to recognise that while these are fun and offer great possibilities for children, there are potential risks including **cyberbullying**, **contact by adults with a sexual interest in children** and **the misuse of personal information**.

As a parent, carer or teacher it's really important to familiarise yourself with social networking services. Most sites stipulate a minimum user age of 13 or 14, although some interactive sites are designed specifically for younger children. By understanding these sites you can help to support your children in choosing an appropriate site and using it in a safe and constructive way.

Social networking sites, alongside sites which enable users to put up their own pictures, text and videos (known as user-generated content) such as YouTube, blogging sites, and interactive games sites for example are part of a social and technological revolution that is known as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is characterised by the ease with which anyone can produce and publish their own content and link with others.

Young people especially love this new environment because they can have a powerful voice to express their identity and opinions and many 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?



PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SOCIAL LIFE?

Increasingly children and young people are able to access and use these applications on the go through mobile and gaming devices, where they are away from supervision, enabling the instant publishing of pictures.

What sometimes appears as a private space for a child can become public very quickly and this blur between public and private expression can potentially put a child at risk in two main ways:

CONTENT:

Children creating or posting inappropriate, offensive or even illegal content in their or others' Web pages could get them into trouble with their school, friends, and even the police, depending on the nature of the material. Content posted to the Web can be copied, altered and reposted by anyone and it's very difficult to 'take back' what may be later regretted. This can damage reputations as well as future prospects.

CONTACT:

Children can also put too much personal information in these sites, exposing their information to adults with a sexual interest in children. Posting or chatting about personal details might enable someone to identify and contact your child online or in person. There is also the more likely risk of cyberbullying with young people intentionally harming another person online.

It is not easy talking to a young person about their social networking online or offline. Young people often think of these sites as their private domain, in much the same way as they 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 they understand the risks and are able to safeguard themselves with the help and support of others.



Parents and carers will be aware of some of the major social networking and other interactive sites including **Facebook, Club Penguin, MySpace, Bebo** and **Habbo Hotel**, and there are a lot of similar services that children and young people enjoy using. Many of these services have good privacy and security settings, and parents should be aware of the tools provided by these sites to help protect users.

Social networking providers in the UK worked in partnership with Government, children's charities and others to produce good practice guidelines for those providing social networks and other interactive services. These guidelines were published by the Home Office Taskforce on Child Protection on the Internet in April 2008. This page summarises the key points.

While the guidance is designed for industry, this information, set out as questions below, can also help parents and carers to be aware of what kinds of protection can be expected and help them to identify such a service for their children to use.

KEY QUESTIONS

QUESTION:

What can I expect from a responsible service provider?

ANSWER:

It is good practice for a social network provider to provide clear easy to find information and advice for all users on staying safe, the safety tools and features available on the service and how to report abuse. There should also be clear rules regarding what can be posted to a service and what should not be posted, alongside reminders about the implications of posting personal information. Users should be reminded that they are not anonymous when using social networking services. Service providers set out rules for use of their service in their terms and conditions and there are consequences for breaching or breaking these. It is important to remember what is illegal offline is also illegal online.

QUESTION:

What can I do if someone is making my child uncomfortable on a social networking site?

ANSWER:

Service providers should provide prominent and easily accessible safety tools for self protection including ways to report individuals, tools to block and remove people from contact lists, tools to pre-moderate (ie check and approve) comments before they are posted on your profile and tools to remove unwanted comments, as well as information on how to delete an account.