

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - leading parenting educator



Facing up to Facebook



If you have a pre-teen or a teenager, you need to become familiar with Facebook and other technologies they are using. Ignorance is no excuse these days.

You can tell a person's generation by the questions their kids ask. Parents of the 1950's thought long and hard over issues such as the age their kids left school and when to get them their first bike. Parents raising their kids in the 1990's pondered the age at which kids should receive regular pocket-money and their children's use of video games.

In the noughties issues surrounding communication technology keep many parents guessing. The age when kids start using Facebook and other social networking media is a burning issue for many parents of pre-teen and early teenage children.

Kids know more than their parents when it comes to the Internet and social media according to recent research. The Optus Family Communication survey reveals that over half (55 per cent) of Australian children outsmart their parents in technology knowledge before they are 13 years old. A further 30 per cent of parents admit they are behind their children by the time they are 15 years old.

Facebook, MSN and other forms of social networking media are here to stay, so my advice for parents is to learn about social media, even if you don't want to embrace it. It can be confronting when your child knows more about technology than you, but smart parents these days let their kids teach them what they know about technology.

So if you have a pre-teen or a teenager you need to become familiar with Facebook and other technologies they are using. Ignorance is no excuse these days.

Facebook doesn't permit kids under the age of 13 to access the site for reasons of personal safety. It doesn't require proof of age to access the site, so it's a guideline only. Facebook's recommendations however, may be useful reference points if you are involved in negotiations with your child over using social networking sites.

More importantly, if young people are using Facebook and other networking sites, they need to fully understand the rules of safe use. Here are some tips:

1. Go through **the set-up phase** with your child, including establishing a personal profile. Check out the homepage

of Facebook and other sites, and use their help sections to answer your questions.

2. Help your young person adjust the **privacy settings** so they suit their level of comfort. Review them often.
3. Reinforce with your child the importance of **never sharing their password**, not even with their best friend, a boyfriend or girlfriend.
4. Discuss other **safety tips** such as the types of information and pictures that should and shouldn't be placed on their pages, as well as what to do if someone sends inappropriate information or initiates unsolicited communication.
5. **Monitor** your child's use by making sure the computer they use at home is in a common area of the house.
6. It's reasonable to expect that you should know your child's **password and log-in** details so you can keep a check on their friends from time to time. This type of monitoring is age-related and may well not be suitable for older teens.
7. Consider getting **your own Facebook page** and use it as a way of communicating with your child. This has the added bonus of enabling you to keep one eye on what's happening on your child's Facebook.

Parents of past generations did their best to keep their kids safe as they negotiated a wider world. I recall teaching my kids stranger danger, drilling safety tips into them as they gained more independence.

As a parent you need to help kids navigate safely and securely in an online world, just as you do in an offline world. Know what kids are doing; spend time teaching them common sense, safety lessons and limit their use of technology so that they stay connected to you and others in your family.

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