

Having “THE TALK”: Teaching Kids to Be Safe Online

You knew it was coming sooner or later. The questions, the awkward answers. It’s time for “The Talk!” The birds and the bees. Only now-a-days the birds are Twitter birds and the bees are just hives of teens clustering on Facebook.

My friend Sam does not allow her children, Keegan, 11 or Emily, 13, to use Facebook or go online by themselves yet. She has heard the horror stories of cyber-bullying and sexual predators, not to mention all the seedy sites you can access from an unmonitored computer. Sam and her husband Rick do not use Facebook or other social sites either, and she says those sites are just filled with self-absorbed teens talking about what they are doing every moment. They do have a computer but the family uses it mostly for email, as a word processor and a (very) occasional research tool. Sam feels it’s important to teach the kids how to look things up in “real” resources like dictionaries, encyclopedias, and regular trips to the library.

While Sam is right to be concerned about her kids online safety, what she is doing is the equivalent to making her kids walk everywhere out of fear of injury in a car. Yes there are dangers, but learning to be responsible and use the tools of today is not only important to their social and academic success today, but to their future success as well. They may be at a severe handicap to those savvy, well-connected and even blogging, peers of theirs when they enter college, and the job market later. It’s time for her to have “The Talk.”

Fear is born out of lack of knowledge and Sam’s lack of accurate information has her misplacing much of her worries. With a little training herself, Sam could be teaching her kids much more than how to tell their friends what they had for lunch. She can help them learn about the power of good networking, social learning and even cloud computing for collaborative assignments at school. They can learn about online safety and even help their friends understand the importance of monitoring their “Google tracks” and personal brand.

Many kids create accounts under altered names and put a fake date of birth to trick the system into allowing their account to be created. While they may not be logging in at home, they may be chatting it up at their friends house instead of watching inappropriate TV shows! Sure there are ways to search for your children on Facebook via their friends, but you can play detective or you can play educator. Why not help your pre-teens learn about online reputation management and privacy issues early instead of learning about these things from their 12-year-old peers?

One alternative to the illegal Facebook account is perhaps setting up a free Gmail account. It has great spam filters, and a free chat feature for those ever-connected pre-teens. Remember, in our day, we spent hours on the phone with the telephone

cord pulled under our bedroom door. Facebook and texting are the telephones of today!

Having “The Talk” with your kids is always awkward so before you sit down with little Johnny and Susie, you must learn to safely use the tools yourself. Here are 4 steps to help you navigate this touchy subject with your sweet Tech-neophyte:

1. Set up a Facebook profile for yourself. You can't expect to give any advice on a tool you have no first-hand experience with. Whether you will ever use this for professional networking or not, you can connect with close friends or family members to start. Spend time clicking around on the features and especially in the ACCOUNT SETTINGS and PRIVACY SETTINGS. Facebook allows you to get pretty granular with who can see what if you set it up right. There is a video all about [PRIVATE PARTS of Facebook](#) that will give you some helpful tips. Once you decide to allow your children to have accounts on Facebook, be sure to connect with them so you can help monitor, but be sure not to start writing on their Facebook wall and commenting on every post, or you will be UNFRIENDED quickly.
2. Share passwords with family members. There have been cases where parents needed to log into a child's online accounts for emergency situations, and have not had the password. Make an agreement with your kids that you will each write your passwords on a slip of paper and place them in a sealed envelope. Sign your names across the backs and place them in a file, promising never to open the envelope unless it is a true emergency. If your teen doesn't mind telling you their passwords, write them down somewhere safe. Remember you pay for internet access so you always have this right, but a good relationship will prevent those second “secret” accounts from being created.
3. Do a Google search on your name with quotation marks around it. See what comes up. Google tracks are those footprints that are left around the web when our name is mentioned somewhere. In business we typically want Google tracks leading people to our products or services, but with kids it is different. We want to manage the tracks that are left behind and be sure they don't lead to somewhere private. Correctly adjusting the privacy settings on Facebook (and any other online account) will prevent personal information from creating tracks all over the web.

Next do the same with each of your children. To manage your online reputation you should do this every few months and you should sit side by side with your children to explain how colleges and future employers do this same type of search. If your name is attached to an undesirable site, or a photo with your name attached, you can write to the site to have it removed or on Facebook you can simply [UNTAG](#) yourself from the picture.

4. Agree to time limits and locations for being online. Even when a teen is ready for Facebook or other online usage, it should be monitored and used in moderation. This is an important step for everyone in the family! These social networking sites can become addictive and we must teach our kids (and ourselves) how to use them correctly.

Just like the “other” dreaded talk parents have to look forward to, you can’t keep your head in the sand hoping it will all pass. Take an active role in learning and teaching your kids, and you will find that you are not only preparing your kids for success today, but you are ensuring you all stay relevant and successful into the future!

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