

# Teen Community Safety Tips

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## Summary Teen Community Safety Tips

### Introduction

Unless your teens are total strangers to the Internet, they know about web sites like myspace.com, facebook.com or xanga.com.

What's the allure of these and hundreds of other free online communities? Teens flock to them to socialize the same way they do to a school dance or local hangout. These sites also let teens create a personal web page and decorate them just like they adorn their bedroom walls or school lockers.

When teens join an online community such as myspace.com they create and post personal profiles that can include their photos, age, city, school, song clips or favorite books and movies. Then they invite their offline friends — or even people they don't know — to join their contact list or so-called *friends* list. Photos of these "friends" then appear on your kid's profile page, too.

Teens also interact within popular online communities by swapping messages with friends, posting diary-like blogs or creative writing, and sharing photos. Beyond their profiles, they can search through message boards and blogs about various topics like sports, relationships or music. Many teens are now even using online communities to organize around social or political issues. Some just like to show off their web design skills by customizing their profiles.

Despite the positives, though, a lot of dangers lurk in these communities, too: sexual predators, identity thieves and cyberbullies. Unfortunately, you can't always chaperone your teens to make sure they're safe online. But you can arm them with knowledge about the darker side of online communities so they can spot trouble and avoid it. Here's how.

### 1. Educate yourself

You can't teach your kids the ways of the Internet — especially online communities — unless you know the lay of the land.

"It's very important for parents to understand the technology themselves," says Danielle Yates, spokesperson of the [Internet Education Foundation](#). "If your child is using MySpace, you should know how it functions, what's on there and who they're talking to."

By exploring online communities, you'll get a sense of how people are interacting on these sites and what kind of content they're posting. You don't need to

register first. For example, to check out [myspace.com](http://myspace.com), just click Browse in the main menu. Or on [xanga.com](http://xanga.com), click through the links under Featured Content.

## **2. Protect your kids' personal information**

You'll notice that teens often post a lot of personal information on these sites. This is where your kids can run into trouble. Anyone can join an online community and pretend to be someone they're not. So predators posing as teens can easily forge friendships with trusting kids in online communities.

These sites even allow visitors to search for people based on age, city and gender. Also, identity thieves could dupe your teen into revealing information and use it to obtain credit cards in your teen's name.

"Kids can post information about their school or pictures of themselves or information about their sporting events, which seems harmless," says Amber Lindsay, spokesperson for [netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org), a part of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. "But they don't understand that predators can piece information together. Predators can then know where to find kids, what they look like and how to identify them."

If your teens hang out in online communities, ask them to show you their profiles and give you a tour of the site. Explain the dangers of posting personal information, and make sure your teen's profile doesn't offer any clues about who she really is.

[Myspace.com](http://myspace.com), for example, allows teens to block anyone who is not a trusted friend from seeing their profiles. To make sure strangers can't see your teen's profile, have her log in to [myspace.com](http://myspace.com). From her profile page, go to Account Settings and then select Privacy Settings to explore your options.

## **3. Explain the dangers of meeting "friends" offline**

Your kids can never be 100% certain of who they're interacting with in online communities. Even so, some kids try to add as many friends as possible to their contact list — meaning thousands of people they don't really know can message them directly.

For these reasons, you should advise teens not to trust a stranger who approaches them outside of an online community and seems to know details from their online profile. Most important, tell your teens to never, under any circumstances, agree to meet up with someone they met online. You can find plenty of stories about meetings like this in the news — and they sometimes have tragic endings.

To stave off such encounters, Yates advises that you tell your teens: "Don't give

out any personally identifiable information, such as where you go to school, what sports teams you're involved with or who your friends are."

#### **4. Remind teens that their profiles are public - forever**

One unintended consequence of online communities is that teens are posting material that can be used against them later. Sometimes they bully other kids from school by posting mean messages on their profiles. Or they tell tales of breaking the law or other unsavory activities. And once posted online, these musings are out there for the world to see.

"A lot of people are worried now about when these kids grow up and whether future employers can find this material," Yates says, adding that schools are clued in to these communities, too. "Anything you post there — pictures of drinking, partying — they can see that and use that against you."

Ask your kids what kind of content they think is appropriate to post in online communities. Offer some examples of what might come back to haunt them. Then set some guidelines together.

#### **5. Keep the lines of communication open**

As with any other aspect of your relationship with your kids, open communication is key. Tell your teenagers they should alert you when something going on in an online community makes them feel scared or uncomfortable.

"Kids are often scared to report something because they're scared their Internet privileges will be taken away," Lindsay says. "But if you're talking about it, they'll feel comfortable that you'll understand and not limit their access."

Together, become familiar with the online community's safety policies and reporting mechanisms. Parry Aftab, executive director of [wiredsafety.org](http://wiredsafety.org), also says that kids who regularly talk with parents about these issues are better prepared for online communities.

"Parents have to educate the kids and communicate with the kids so that the teens can look out for themselves and each other," she says.

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