

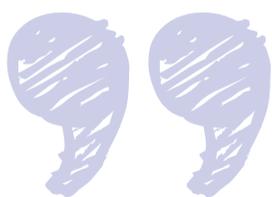
# social networking uncovered

By Yvonne Eve Walus

Social networking is a huge online phenomenon and chances are that before long, your tween or teen will want to join the online community. Here's some background information to enable you to decide if it's suitable for your family members.



Depending on your account's security settings, strangers may see your information. "Whole family on holiday for a week" is not the most sensible thing to say on Facebook.



## What is it?

Online Social Networking is a name for Internet sites such as Facebook or MySpace, where you create a profile about yourself and chat with people.

Children use social networking to be cool. A visible web presence is a status symbol: display a cool photo, say cool things, link to many friends. When a popular boy or girl agrees to be your friend online, it's a cause for celebration.

## Why is it popular?

Children crave attention. Interaction on social sites makes them feel acknowledged and their opinion valued. Belonging to an online group also satisfies their need to be part of a group.

Sometimes the desire to be seen doing cool things outweighs the joy of actually doing them, and a trip to Rainbow's End is no fun unless you announce it on Facebook. While sharing good news with friends is normal human behaviour, experts warn online socialisation may replace real-life experiences because of its alluring nature, such as convenience, games, quizzes ("What movie character are you like?", "Do you like the same clothes as your friends?"), and the freedom to comment on everything from your friend's latest news to Twilight.

## How does it work?

All social sites are free, so which one you choose usually depends on where your friends have their accounts. A few years ago, Bebo and MySpace were all the rage, now Facebook is taking over.

A typical account consists of your photo, contact details, interests and a blank wall on which you can post your news, snapshots, videos, links to interesting articles, upcoming events (birthdays, parties, school trips, sports) and anything else you can think of.

You have to be 13-years and over to have a Facebook account. However, some parents disregard this or allow their children access to a grownup's account.

If you allow your children access to social networks, discuss all safety and privacy aspects fully and consider what rules to put in place. **Things to discuss could include:**

1. Adjusting all security settings to maximum.
2. Having a strong password.
3. Considering how much personal information to share.
4. Whether only real-life friends can become online friends.
5. Parents being allowed to monitor their child's account.
6. What if a teacher wants to be friends on Facebook?
7. Remind your child that anything they write is public and permanent (especially

"I hate my teacher" or "Samuel is an idiot"), and any photo they display online can be circulated or altered.

## Cyber bullying

Children posting hurtful things about others, impersonating someone online or sending insulting messages are all examples of cyber bullying. It can happen whether or not your child has a social network account, so discuss how you would tackle online intimidation. Reassure your child they won't be punished if they tell you about a problem, even if they themselves caused it. Keep the evidence, contact the website in question and the school, if you know the bullies. Physical threats should be reported to the police.

Check out [www.netsafe.org.nz](http://www.netsafe.org.nz) for more ideas.

## Warning bells

Depending on your account's security settings, strangers may see your information. "Whole family on holiday for a week" is not the most sensible thing to say on Facebook.

### If your Facebook account is hacked, a social engineer would get:

- your child's name and photo
- the sports they play, music they like, TV programmes they watch
- your child's schedule
- their school
- names of their family members
- photos of the family car, the garden, the child's room, etc.

Armed with that, a predator could approach your child before a hockey match and say, "Your mother asked me to take you to the hospital. She and your sister Jane had an accident in the red Subaru ..."

## Kid-friendly sites

*Dear Parent, Your daughter just signed up for a FREE Barbie Girls® Basic account ... Now she can create an online character, design her own room, play games, go "shopping," and make friends – all in a controlled environment!*

Social sites aimed at children – such as Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters or Stardoll – are different from Facebook and MySpace. The experience is anonymous, although children often tell their friends what screen names they use, and half the fun is finding your real-life friend inside the game.

Parental approval of the account is needed and a special Parents' Place lets you manage your child's password and interaction options.

The sites have kid-appropriate games, puzzles and activities (care for a pet, dress your character, etc). The account is free, but your child may soon want access to enticing member-only features available at a fee.

## How safe?

The best way to check out a social networking site is to create an account and play around. If the site has an age-restriction, it's probably for a reason. See who has access to your personal details, whether you're allowed to use a screen name, whether you'd be able to see everything your child posts.

There are certain monitoring programmes, such as Net Guardian, Net Nanny and Cyberpatrol, that can be subscribed to that will actively monitor websites to form a black-list that will periodically up-date the software on your computer. All new websites that are found to be unsuitable are blocked. Other programmes, such as Microsoft Internet Explorer, Norton Utilities and McAfee security suite, have parental-based blocking, which relies on web certificates to provide the rating and the programme blocks accordingly. The problem with parental-based blocking is that there are a number of uncertified sites containing objectionable material.

Michele Thompson, Norton Internet Safety Advocate for Australia and New Zealand, advises: "Children's online activities are always changing, especially as they grow older. Talk with your child, talk to other parents and their teachers, and really pay attention to what is going on in the media as these issues grow and change. Parents should monitor what children are doing on the computer. Be in the same room when a child uses the computer, or keep the computer in an area where other family members are usually present."

Teach your child to be Internet-smart the way you teach them to drive: when and if appropriate. Ultimately, a social networking account is like a driver's license: despite the risks, many people get one.



## The difference

- Facebook is about sharing personal stuff: photos, events, news. Age-restricted (13+).
- MySpace lets you search for strangers with similar interests. Age-restricted (14+).
- Sites like Shelfari (books) or ShareTheMusic focus on specific hobbies and topics.
- Club Penguin, Boom Bang, Neopets, Webkinz and Barbie Girls are interest-based communities aimed at children. No real names allowed.