

Internet Safety - Social Media

In today's connected world, social media is a core part of many people's daily lives. From teens and younger children to parents and educators, navigating platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat has become an essential skill. However, while social media offers endless opportunities for creativity, connection, and learning, it also poses challenges and risks that families must address together. Here's an essential guide on how to stay safe and secure in the social media universe.

Case Study: Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided bonds where individuals develop emotional connections with celebrities, social media influencers, or fictional characters, despite no direct interaction. They grew in prevalence during the pandemic, offering comfort and a sense of belonging. However, these connections can lead to issues like social isolation or emotional vulnerability. For instance, a young person might feel strongly connected to a favourite YouTuber, mimicking their behaviour or feeling devastated by negative news about them. Parents can mitigate risks by fostering discussions about online influences and setting boundaries on screen time.



Read more here: (<https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/news-blogs/what-are-parasocial-relationships/>).



Figure 1:

https://free-images.com/display/media_social_media_apps.html

Understanding the Benefits and Risks

Social media isn't all doom and gloom—it's a place where children and young people can express themselves, learn new things, and maintain friendships, especially during crucial stages of growing up. But these platforms also present specific risks, such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and the pressure to compare oneself to others.

One of the most pressing concerns is the personal information shared online, either knowingly or unintentionally. Details like location, age, or school can be easily accessed, leading to potential dangers. Similarly, the addictive nature of many apps, with features designed to keep users endlessly scrolling, can impact mental well-being, sleep quality, and focus on offline responsibilities.

Encouraging Open Conversations

A fundamental strategy for promoting safety on social media is communication. Talking regularly and openly with children about their online experiences is crucial. This involves asking questions that show genuine interest, like “What do you like most about this app?” or “How do you feel after spending time online?” Creating a non-judgmental space for these conversations can empower children to share their concerns or any uncomfortable experiences, making it easier for parents to step in when necessary.

Setting Ground Rules and Boundaries

Setting clear guidelines is vital. This may include age-appropriate limitations on certain platforms or restricting the amount of screen time. Discussing and agreeing on rules helps establish a shared understanding. Families can consider rules around bedtime phone usage, keeping devices in common spaces, and following a “no phones at the dinner table” policy.

Equally important is privacy. Teach children how to use the privacy settings available on most social media platforms. Encourage them to think carefully before sharing pictures or personal updates and to review their friend or follower lists regularly. A golden rule to instill is: “If you wouldn’t say it in person, don’t post it online.”

Helping Kids Build Critical Thinking

As children become more active on social media, teaching them to think critically is essential. They should learn to recognize when a post might be fake or when someone could be acting in a suspicious manner. Children should feel confident in blocking or reporting any inappropriate behaviour and know they can come to an adult if they feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Another aspect of critical thinking involves managing the pressure of likes and comments. It’s important to emphasize that social media shouldn’t determine self-worth. Help children understand that people often post curated and idealized versions of their lives, and these aren’t always accurate reflections of reality.

Support and Resources for Families

Thankfully, numerous resources are available to help parents and guardians keep children safe online. The NSPCC's website offers tips on setting up parental controls, while organizations like Childnet and the UK Safer Internet Centre provide educational materials and guides. These tools can help parents feel more equipped to understand the online world and protect their children.

Staying informed and proactive is key. Remember, the goal isn't to eliminate social media use but to ensure children can enjoy it in a secure, healthy way. With open communication, clear guidelines, and an understanding of the risks, families can work together to make the digital world a safer and more positive space.

For more tips, check out Childnet, NSPCC, or the UK Safer Internet Centre. Together, we can make social media a force for good, one safe click at a time.