

# Social Networking - How to Keep Safe

'Social Networking' - most of us have heard the phrase, but who knows what it actually means?

Social networking tends to take place on the internet and is focussed on building communities of people who have a shared interest i.e. attend the same school or listen to the same music.

Social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and Bebo offer an online world in which children and young people can enjoy communicating with each other quickly and easily. Sites allow users to create an online profile in which they can publish generally anything they want about themselves, their life, their opinions, photographs and videos. It is important that children and young people adhere to certain site rules and do not publish anything illegal within their profile; this can lead to getting into trouble at school and with the police.

Online profiles can be viewed by other internet users; some sites allow users to keep their profile private and only share it with people they know. In this way another site user will make contact and then there is a choice whether to make your profile available to them and whether to respond at all.

It is easy for anyone to publish a profile and create an online character who may or may not reflect reality. In these circumstances a child or young person may think they are chatting to or sharing information with someone of a similar age when in reality it could be an adult using the facility to gain access to children. Children and young people can sometimes publish too much personal information and photographs making themselves vulnerable targets for adults with sexual motivation. Publishing too many personal details may make it easy for someone to identify and contact a child or young person face to face.

Social networking has created powerful ways in which to communicate and share information such as the facility to create an online journal or web-log (blog) and instant messaging. These tools are regularly used by millions of people with young people increasingly including them as part of their daily lives; whilst it is imperative to stay mindful of potential dangers it is also important to realise that millions of people are using these sites and facilities every second of everyday without experiencing any problems.

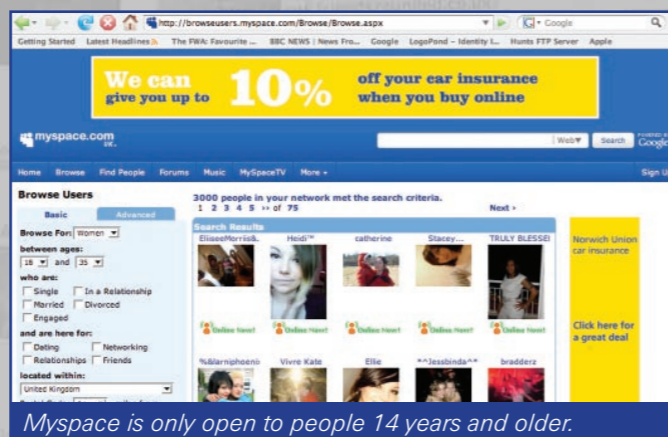


Facebook has 115,000,000 registered users worldwide.

Source: Wikipedia

Social networking sites and instant messaging facilities are used as a way of 'hanging out' with friends, carrying on the school day chatting and gossiping, making new friends who share similar interests or views and keeping in touch with friends and family who do not necessarily form part of life on a day-to-day basis. Online communication can be a positive way in which to express views or emotions that for whatever reason are not openly shared in other forums.

It is important to note that some site users may abuse online facilities and 'cyber bully'. This may take the form of a one-off cruel or threatening instant message though there have been instances where profiles and photographs have been doctored, published and generally used to harass and humiliate individuals. What may start as something funny, can sometimes turn into something nasty. It is important to consider the implications of anything published as content could potentially be copied, changed and used elsewhere, theoretically staying on the internet forever.



Myspace is only open to people 14 years and older.

Source: Wikipedia

There are many reasons why children and young people are fans of social networking sites and it can be a good, fun way in which to communicate and share information. But there are hazards to be aware of and ways to help protect children and young people in your care whilst they access the internet.

It can be difficult to talk to children and young people about social networking and the internet as they very often know more about it than most adults. It is also something that is often done in private, alone and perhaps out of sight in a bedroom or home office. However, it has been well documented that children have been hurt using social networking sites so it is important to get involved.

It is possible to encourage children and young people in your care to use social networking facilities in an appropriate manner helping them understand that you are happy for them to access sites whilst balancing this with encouraging them to be mindful of the dangers and raising their awareness of how to stay safe online. Promote the positive use of technology rather than purely highlighting the potential risks.

It is a good idea to understand how children and young people in your care are using social networking sites. Which do they like? Which do they often access? Perhaps they could help you to create a profile, this would help you understand how they use social networking sites and what they think is appropriate to publish. Working together in this way may lead to a discussion without conflict about the dangers of talking to strangers, publishing photographs and sharing contact details.

Children and young people in your care should know that if they are communicating with anyone who sends them or asks for or talks about inappropriate content or images; they must tell you. If you suspect they are experiencing cyber bullying or engaging in contact with someone who could be grooming them for sexual interest then you must keep as many messages, comments, emails and images as you can as evidence.

There are further resources you can use to help you:

- [www.natalert.gov.au](http://www.natalert.gov.au)
- [www.cybersmartkids.com.au](http://www.cybersmartkids.com.au)
- [www.childnet-int.org](http://www.childnet-int.org)



Bebo is popular in Australia, New Zealand, UK and USA.

Source: Wikipedia

