Common Sense on Protecting and Respecting Privacy

What's the issue?

Our kids live in a culture of sharing that has forever changed the concept of privacy. In a world where everyone is connected and anything created online can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in a heartbeat, privacy starts to mean something different than simply guarding personal or private information. Each time your child fills out a profile without privacy controls, comments on something, posts a video, or texts a picture of themselves to friends, they potentially broadcast themselves to the world.

Some facts

Approximately 3 out of 4 teens on social networking sites use privacy controls on their profiles

About 40 percent of kids have posted something on their social networking pages that they later regret

A little less than 20 percent of teens report that they've had private material (IMs, texts, emails) forwarded without their permission

Why It Matters

Digital life is both public and permanent. Everything our kids do online creates digital footprints that migrate and persist. Something that happens on the spur of the moment — a funny picture, an angry post — can resurface years later. And if kids aren't careful, their reputations can be harmed.

Your child may think he or she just sent something to a friend — but that friend can send it to a friend's friend, who can send it to their friends' friends, and so on. That's how secrets become headlines and how false information spreads fast and furiously. The stakes only increase when we remember that all of this takes place in front of a huge, invisible audience. Kids' deepest secrets can be shared with thousands of people they've never even met.

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Parent tips for all kids

» **Help kids think long term.** Everything leaves a digital footprint. Whatever gets created may never go away. If they don't want to see it tomorrow, they'd better not post it today. Explain to them that nothing is really private online — no matter what they think. Privacy settings aren't infallible. Others can pass on information that is supposed to be private. It's up to kids to protect themselves by thinking twice before they post anything that could damage their reputation or that someone else could use to embarrass or hurt them.

» **Teach kids to keep personal information private.** Help kids define which information is important for them to keep private when they're online. To start, we recommend that kids not share their addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.

» **Make sure your kids use privacy settings on their social network pages.** Encourage kids to think carefully about the nature of their relationships (close friends, family, acquaintances, strangers) and adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

» **Remind kids to protect their friends' privacy.** Passing along a rumor or identifying someone in a picture (called "tagging") affects other people's privacy. If your kids are tagged in friends' photos, they can ask to have the photos or the tags removed. But beyond that, there's not too much they can do.

» **Remind kids that the Golden Rule applies online.** What goes around comes around. If kids spread a rumor or talk trash about a teacher, they can't assume that what they post will stay private. Whatever negative things they say can and probably will come back to haunt them, in more ways than they can imagine.