A Positive Digital Footprint

Thanks to cell phones, computers, and tablets, tweens can instantly interact with more people and access more information than could any generation in the past. But with these benefits come responsibilities. Encourage your child to build a good online reputation and stay safe with the following tips.

Set ground rules

If your middle grader goes online, it's a good idea to create rules up front. Sample rules might include: "Only chat with people you know" and "Visit safe websites." Post the list to remind her about safe and positive behavior. Or consider having her sign a "usage contract" so you're both on the same page. Make your own, or find one at *fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/family-online-safety-contract*. *Note:* If your child is already using social media, make sure she sticks to these rules. If she isn't on yet, now is the perfect time to talk about her digital footprint—before she creates accounts.

Search for yourself

Does your tween understand how easy it is to leave a digital trail? Have him type his name into a search engine. If he has ever had his picture in the newspaper, won an award, posted a review, or written on a blog, his name or words might pop up. *Note:* If he sees anything he doesn't like, he could ask the person who posted it or the website owner to remove it. (Click on "About" or "Contact" to reach the site owner.)

Aim for balance

If you limit your tween's screen time, he'll have more time for schoolwork, physical activity, reading—and being with friends and family in person. Experts recommend no more than two hours of screen time daily (not including homework) for middle graders.

Protect your image

Ask your middle schooler what kind of impression she wants to make on people who view her online activities. A good rule of thumb is not to post anything she wouldn't want her teachers or grandparents to see. Also mention that it's never too early to think about what future employers or college admissions officers will find when they consider her applications. That means avoiding bad language and inappropriate photos, for instance.

Be smart about passwords

Your tween's digital footprint can be hurt by people hacking into his accounts. That's one reason it's so important to set strong passwords and keep them secret. Many kids make the mistake of using words others would know, such as a pet's name or a favorite sports team. Instead, suggest a mix of numbers and upper- and lower-case letters. He should change passwords at least every three months and not share them with even his closest friends. If someone does learn a password, he'll need to change it right away. *Note:* Have him share passwords with you so you can make sure he stays safe online.

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Online is forever

In the age of social networking, texting, and hacking, anything your middle grader posts or sends electronically may never really go away. This is true even if he deletes it or uses apps that promise to instantly remove posts. Point out that once he posts a comment or photo, he should assume it's out there forever. For instance, someone could have taken a screenshot of his post before he deleted it. Or an older copy of the website may be available.

Use tools

Have your child use built-in safety controls in websites or apps. For example, she could set a website to "safe mode" when watching videos. That way, she shouldn't see posted comments, ads, or suggested videos that may be inappropriate. Also, help her manage social networks so she can review her posts before they appear to make sure they cast her in a good light. Finally, her devices and apps probably have parental controls. Use these to limit websites she visits and to turn off chat options.

Update safely

Have your tween disable "automatic updates" on phone or tablet apps. Each time an app is updated, privacy settings might change, making his personal information and photos suddenly public. Instead, he should wait for a notification that an update is available. Then, he can read its latest sharing policy and change settings as needed so he controls what others see about him.

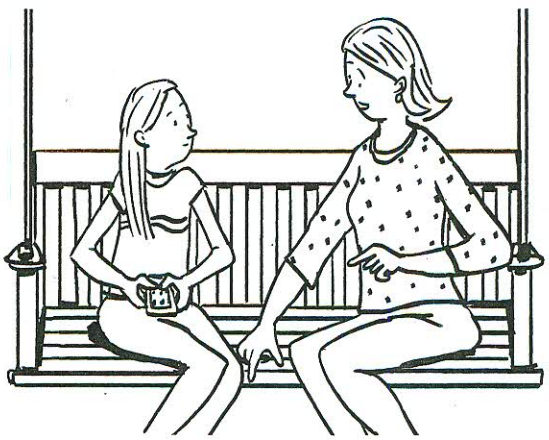
Be a picky clicker

Encourage your youngster to be choosy about what she clicks on. The wrong link, pop-up, or attachment can put unwanted software on her device. Some of these programs steal personal information or even send messages on a user's behalf. Point out that she'd feel pretty embarrassed if an email she didn't write went to everyone in her inbox. To help guard against this, help her keep protective software (anti-virus programs, adware removers) up to date. Also, have your tween check with you before she downloads software. She especially shouldn't trust pop-up or banner ads that invite her to try programs.

Fight cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, or using digital tools to repeatedly threaten or embarrass someone, has become as common as face-to-face bullying. It can range from posting nasty comments on a person's website to spreading rumors in cyberspace or sending threatening text messages.

Don't be a bully. Build "digital empathy" in your child. It may be harder to consider feelings in the virtual world, but remind her that there are real people out there reading what she writes! Also, point out that cyberbullying not only harms victims, it also hurts the bully's reputation. For instance, other kids may defriend or block someone who posts mean comments.



Avoid becoming a victim. Take steps to cut your tween's risk of being bullied online. For example, she should avoid websites and apps that allow anonymous posts—cyberbullies thrive there. And she should connect online only with people she knows and trusts in real life.

React safely. Tell your middle grader to let you know immediately if she is cyberbullied. Have her delete cruel posts and block the sender. For a threatening message, contact the website owner or even her school or the police.

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