Tips for Girls

Who's that Girl? Image and Social Media / Girl Scout Research Institute

Social networking sites have become extremely popular among teens, although the negative implications of using these sites freely are understood by few. When you sign up for Facebook or Twitter, there are few guidelines regarding how you should act and what you should and shouldn't do on these sites. Looking to see how others behave doesn't help much either, because a lot of teens use social networking sites to present themselves differently than they do in person, and it can seem as though it's a contest to get as many friends as possible in one's "network."

Parents may not like that you're spending so much time on social networking sites, but it's not all bad and deleting your profile may not necessarily be the answer.

The good: When asked about their social networking behavior, teen girls say they've actually become closer to some friends (56%) and have gained more friends (44%) because of social networking. Teen girls also say they can be more honest with each other (48%) on social networking sites than in face-to-face interaction. Social networking sites are also a good place to get involved with causes and/or raise money for organizations (52%), because news travels fast.

The bad: However, teen girls are not nearly as safe/careful on social networking sites as they should be or want to be. Around 30% of teen girls have profile content viewable by strangers, and more than half (54%) of teen girls are friends with someone they have never met! Teens say that a lot of girls try and look/act differently on their social networking sites than they do in person. They downplay the good things (being smart, kind), and boost things that make them look popular and cool (being fun, funny, social). Many (68%) girls have had a negative social networking experience, such as being gossiped about or having personal information posted publicly about them. But almost as frequently (55%), girls say that they've been responsible for taking part in these negative activities.

The ugly: Teens who say they don't feel good about themselves are at a higher risk of social networking privacy/safety issues, are more likely to make themselves look different than who they really are, and have had more negative experiences with social networking.

Tips for Safe Social Networking

- **Privacy :** Get familiar with privacy settings and check them frequently, as they tend to change often. Social networking sites don't care too much about your privacy so it's your responsibility to take charge. You can do this by clicking on the Help section of the site you're using. By making your profile "private," only your "friends" can view information on your profile page. If you don't do anything about your privacy settings, your profile and your activity can be public for anyone in the world to see. This includes teachers, coaches, principals, bosses, future jobs, colleges, relatives, and just plain strangers. Authority figures (employers, college admissions officers) could look at your social networking profile activity and judge your character based on what they see. They could quickly form a negative impression of you based on your pictures, status updates, comments, and language, without knowing you or having met you in person.

- **Your "Friends":** Be careful when people "friend request" you. If you decide to accept friends you don't know, just make sure you don't have any personal information (address, name of school, phone number) up on your profile. (You can always use only your first name, a fake name, or a nickname, etc.)

  Keep track of who your friends are. Some teens have hundreds, even thousands, of friends on their social networking sites. It's hard to keep track of this many friends. Remember that all of these people can see your social networking activity.

Tips for Healthy and Fun Social Networking

- **What does it mean to be popular?** There are other ways to get noticed than by posting revealing pictures of yourself online or acquiring as many friends as possible in your social network. Try to be yourself both in person and online. Others will respect your honesty and individuality. Don't allow yourself to feel pressured to put up provocative photos of yourself, even if it seems like everyone else is doing it. Remember it's girls who don't feel good about themselves who post these types of photos. In addition, try not to fall into the gossip trap, keeping in mind that when you put information out there, all your "friends" (and all of the public) can see it. Gossiping/bullying makes people feel bad. Chances are it's happened to you in one form or another: recall how being targeted made you feel. Not good, right? Apply this understanding in your interactions with others.

- **Take the good, not the bad:** It's okay to be involved with social networking, but try to take advantage of the good parts, not the bad. Remember what teen girls say about the benefits of social networking:

  o Ability to be a bit more honest online than in person. *Maybe you have wanted to be honest with one of your friends about something and would feel more comfortable talking to her online.*

  o More and better friendships online. *Maybe you can talk about things with friends more easily online than in person. Maybe you can learn some new things about friends that you didn't know before.*

  o Ability to get involved in a cause/organization. *All gossip travels fast, including good gossip, like that involving an organization or a cause. Maybe you want to get involved or help out with a cause but don't know how.*

  o Ability to stand up for someone being bullied on a social networking site. *We know that gossiping is common and easy to become a part of online. Have you ever stood up for someone and stopped gossip in its tracks?*

- **Know what's real and what's not real:** Know that many girls try to appear different online than they do in person. Why do you think they do this? Try to understand the difference between the "social networking world" and the real world. Stay involved in activities after school and keep hanging out with your friends face-to-face whenever possible, understanding that 92% of teen girls prefer their face-to-face friendships over social networking friendships. Anyway, face-to-face interaction enables you to establish who your "real" friends are and ensures that you won't get too caught up in the online social networking world. Your real friends can see you for who you are inside, rather than simply for what you look like. Remember, there's a whole world outside of social networks. Go out and live it!