

Youth and the Social Networking Craze

Have you twittered yet? At a recent meeting with my colleagues this questions caught many of us off guard. Social networking sights like Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and Xanga are becoming a norm for communicating with others, especially for teens and college aged youth. These sights help the next generation to express themselves and stay connected. I will be the first to admit that I am a Facebook junkie. I originally signed up for a Facebook account to stay in contact with the growing 4-H program, hoping that going to them would help them to stay connected to what is happening throughout the county. I now have over 500 friends, including elementary classmates that I have not seen or heard from in over 20 years.

Like any aspect of the internet there are pros and cons to social networking sights that parents and teens using the sight need to be aware of and plan for. The scary fact is that what is out there now is just the tip of the iceberg. New social networking sights are being introduced all of the time and banning your kids from being part of this new media outlet is not the solution. Research shows that through social networking sites youth are picking up basic social and technical skills they need to fully participate in society. The tools they use allow them to add new media skills to their repertoire, allow them to engage in self-direct learning and gives them the opportunity to enjoy friendship-driven and interest-driven online activities. Social networking sites can be fun, engaging and positive for youth. Research has shown that kids explore interests, find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community and allows them to connect to with peers who share specialized niche interests.

Working in a program like 4-H, that reaches over 70,000 youth across Missouri, I have seen social networking serve as a way for youth to stay in touch after participating in a trip or activity. The current County 4-H Group on Facebook allows me to make direct and quick contact with you about an upcoming meeting or a last minute opportunity.

When considering the benefits to allowing youth participation in social networking the most important thing is that you have all of your facts in order. Consider the following tips to help in keeping your kids safe on social networking sites:

1. Online world safety is very similar to off line or real work safety. Convey the message that it is important not to talk to anyone they don't know and don't post personally identifiable information. Become educated on the true dangers that exist online for kids not only through your home computer, but also through cell phones, hand-helds, and gaming systems.
2. Help your child to realize that being part of a social networking site creates an internet thumbprint of their life. Once a picture or comment is posted on a site there is no way to get it back. Many young people are finding out the hard way that a picture of them at a party or an inappropriate comment on their page could be the end to a promising job, a sports career, or a leadership position with an organization. It is important that whatever is posted on the social networking site is something that they would be comfortable showing their grandma or their pastor.

3. Stay aware of the trends and dangers that exist for your children online. Use the computer as a parent to join sites where you can learn about positive (and negative) trends and dangers, share experiences, and stay up to date on what is going on.
4. Get comfortable and involved with the technology your kids uses. You can't change it, or eliminate it from your kids lives, so embrace it, learn about it, use it . Ask your kids to share with you what they know. Learn about the online sites and online games they like to play. Do some site research on their own to share with them games you think they'll enjoy and that you'll feel comfortable with.
5. Open up communication lines with your kids, this is important for internet safety and also other aspects of you family life. Too often we use game systems or the computer as babysitters, it's important that parents think about the safety of their children online just as they do offline. That means understanding what the dangers are. If you open up communication about the "weird things/dangerous things" you've heard about or seen on the internet, and you make your kids know that they can share anything "weird" with you, you'll both become more comfortable talking about technology; you'll open lines of communication.
6. Set up a log in for each family member on the home computer. With all computers, you can set up a log in for each family member. From there, you can monitor what each person is doing. The administrator has all the passwords and can use parental controls and block certain types of websites with key words.

If you want to know what your friends, colleagues, or your favorite actor are doing today just check them out on twitter. I am still not convinced that it is worth my time to know what is going on in every minute of Ashton Kutchers life, but at least by educating myself on social networking I have learned how easy it is to follow him around. No matter what decision you make about your child and their ability to be part of a social networking group use the principle of open communication in all aspects of your family life. If your child understands that you are there for them and want to know what they are doing, no matter how insignificant some of it might be, an open line of communication will be important when problems, troubles, and those “weird” things arise.

For more information on this or other youth development related topics please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.