Protecting Your Online Identity and Reputation

Whenever you use a social network, send a text, or post online, you're adding to your online identity. Your online identity may be different from your real-world identity — the way your friends, parents, and teachers think of you.

Trying on different personas is part of the fun of an online life. You can change the way you act and present yourself to others, and you can learn more about things that interest you. And, just as in real life, you can take steps to help you stay in control.

Things to Consider

Here are some things to consider to safeguard your online identity and reputation:

Remember that nothing is temporary online. The online world is full of chances to interact and share with others. It's also a place where nothing is temporary and there are no "take-backs." A lot of what you do and say online can be seen even if you delete it — and it's a breeze for others to copy, save, and forward your information.

Mark your profiles as private. Anyone who accesses your profile on social networking sites can copy or screen-grab information and photos that you may not want the world to see. Don't rely on the site's default settings. Read each site's guidelines to make sure you're doing everything you can to keep your material private.

Safeguard your passwords and change them often. If someone logs on to a site and pretends to be you, they can trash your identity. Pick passwords that no one will guess and change them often. Never share them with anyone other than your parents or a trusted adult. Not even your best friend, boyfriend, or girlfriend should know your private passwords!

Don't post inappropriate or sexually provocative pictures or comments. Things that seem funny or cool to you right now might not seem so cool years from now — or when a teacher, admissions officer, or potential employer sees them. A good rule of thumb is: if you'd feel weird if your grandmother, coach, or best friend's parents saw it, it's probably not a good thing to post. Even if it's on a private page, it could be hacked or copied and forwarded.

Don't respond to inappropriate requests. Many teens get inappropriate messages and solicitations when they're online. These can be scary, strange, and even embarrassing. If you feel harassed by a stranger or a friend online, tell an adult you trust immediately. It is never a good idea to respond. Responding is only likely to make things worse, and might result in you saying something you wish you hadn't.

You can report inappropriate behavior or other concerns at www.cybertipline.org.

Take a breather to avoid "flaming." Feel like firing off an angry text or comment? Wait a few minutes, calm down, and remember that the comments may stay long after you've regained your temper or changed your mind.

Feeling anonymous on social networks or other sites can make people feel OK about posting mean, insulting, or abusive comments. Sharing stuff or making angry comments when we're not face to face with someone can be hurtful and damage how others see us if they find out. A good rule to remember: if you wouldn't say it, show it, or do it in person, you don't want to online.

Respect copyrights. Know about copyright laws and make sure you don't post, share, or distribute copyrighted images, songs, or files. Sure, you want to share them, but you don't want to do anything illegal that can come back to haunt you later.

Check yourself. Check your "digital footprint." Try typing your screen name or email address into a search engine and see what comes up. That's one way to get a sense of what others see as your online identity.

Take it offline. In general, if you have questions about the trail you're leaving online, don't be afraid to ask a trusted adult. Sure, you might know more about the online world than a lot of adults do, but they have life experience that can help.

Your online identity and reputation are shaped in much the same way as your real-life identity. But when you're online you don't always get a chance to explain your tone or what you mean. Thinking before you post and being responsible can help you avoid leaving an online identity trail you regret.

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