

# Help Kids Make Friends and Interact Safely Online

So much of kids' social lives happens online. Whether they're texting with their study group, flirting on social media, or voice-chatting on game platforms, middle and high schoolers can learn to communicate in safe and healthy ways. These skills will help kids -- and the people they're communicating with -- have positive experiences online.

Check out these 4 tips 

1

## ***Give them the right words.***

Kids learn about appropriate verbal and physical communication from watching you. But online conversations can be invisible. Occasionally, narrate as you're writing texts or social media comments when your kids are in earshot.

2

## ***Learn about their worlds.***

Tweens and teens have unique communication styles—especially online. As much as possible, keep an eye on what they're saying and doing online to understand the norm in their worlds. Don't police everything they say, but keep an ear out for aggressive trash-talking, hate speech, rude images, or anything hurtful. If you see stuff that crosses the line, speak up. Kids need to understand that their words have consequences.

3

## ***Empathize with the pressure to overshare.***

Tweens and teens might feel pushed into sharing a sexy photo for different reasons: a dare, fear of damaging a relationship, or just because "everyone else is doing it." But this one is nonnegotiable. Tell them that you understand how bad it can feel to disappoint a friend. Then help them imagine how much worse it would feel if a private picture were shared with their whole school.

4

## ***Develop their instincts.***

Help kids learn to trust their guts so they can suss out creepy, risky, or otherwise unsafe online situations. Playact a few scenarios: What if someone asks to take a conversation private? What if someone asks for your phone number? What if someone invites you to a private chat room? Be aware that some kids (even "good" kids) will explore iffy stuff online out of curiosity. But the minute they feel uncomfortable, they need to shut things down.



# 5 Myths and Truths About Kids' Internet Safety

Help keep your kids' online experiences positive and productive by learning the truth (and ignoring the rumors) about what really makes them safe.

By [Caroline Knorr](#)

If you believe everything you hear about kids online, you might think pedophiles and cyberbullies are around every cyber-corner. Yes, there is bad stuff out there. But the truth is, there's a lot of good, and some experts are arguing against a **"techno-panic mindset"** that worries parents unnecessarily. The bottom line is that we can't keep our kids safe if we don't know the facts. Here are the five most popular myths about Internet safety—and the truths that can set your worries free.



**Myth: Social media turns kids into cyberbullies.**

**Truth: There are many reasons why a kid might cyberbully, and social media is just a convenient way to do the dirty work.**

The reality is that kids who engage in this behavior **typically have something else going on that compels them to act out**. They might be in crisis—at home, at school, or otherwise socially. They may also be bullying in person, or they may have an **underdeveloped sense of empathy**. Awareness of a cyberbully's circumstances—though not excusing the behavior—can help parents and educators recognize the warning signs and potentially intervene before it goes too far.

**Myth: Teaching kids not to talk to strangers is the best way to keep them safe online.**

**Truth: Teaching kids to recognize predatory behavior will help them avoid unwelcome advances.**

In today's world, where **kids as young as 8 are interacting with people online**, they need to know the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate conversation. **Kids are often pressured by their own friends to talk about sex**, so they need to know it's OK to tell peers to back off. Go beyond "stranger danger" and teach them what kind of questions are not OK (for example, not OK: "Are you a boy or a girl?"; "Where do you live?"; "What are you wearing?"; "Do you want to have a private conversation?"). Also, teach kids to not go looking for thrills online. Risky online relationships **more frequently evolve in chat rooms when teens willingly seek out or engage in sexual conversation**.

**Myth: Social media alienates kids.**

**Truth: Most kids say social media strengthens their relationships.**

Most kids want to have fun, hang out, and socialize normally online—and in fact, according to **our research**, that's what the majority is doing. Check out these comforting stats:

- Most teens say social media has a positive effect on them.
- Social media is an important avenue of creative expression.
- The quality of kids' online relationships has a big impact on their well-being.

And how about the kids who've **fought cyberbullying** and used the Internet for a social cause like **Greta Thunberg**? More and more, kids are harnessing the power of the online world—and busting up a few myths along the way.

**Myth: It's dangerous to post pictures of your kids online.**

**Truth: If you use privacy settings, limit your audience, and don't ID your kids, it can be done fairly safely.**

Although it's true that posting anything online invites some risks, there are ways to limit them if you're smart about how you do it.

- **Use privacy settings.** Make sure your privacy settings are set so only the closest people in your network can view your posts.
- **Limit your audience.** Only share posts with close family and friends. Or use photo-sharing sites such as Google Photos that require a log-in to see pics.
- **Don't rush your kids into social media.** Obey the rules about keeping kids under 13 off social media. Once your kids have an online profile, they can be tagged in photos, which magnifies their online presence. If you're going to upload photos of them, don't identify them and don't tag them—that way the photo can't be traced back to them.

**Myth: Parental controls are the best way to monitor my kids' online activities.**

**Truth: Focusing on only one internet safety method lulls you into a false sense of security.**

To **keep your kids safe online**—and to raise them to be responsible, respectful digital citizens—it takes more than installing parental controls. For starters, parental controls can be defeated by determined kids. They also often catch too much in their filters, rendering any Internet search useless, and they set up a “parent vs. kid” dynamic that could backfire.

By all means, **use parental controls to help prevent exposure to age-inappropriate material and to manage time limits**. But don't think they get you off the hook. Continue to discuss responsible, respectful online behavior, set rules and consequences for misbehavior, and train your kid to manage their own usage.