

Common Sense on Privacy and Digital Footprints

What's the Issue?

Our teens live in a culture of sharing that has forever changed the concept of privacy. In a world where everyone is connected and anything created online can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in a heartbeat, privacy starts to mean something different than simply guarding personal or private information. Each time your teen fills out a profile without privacy controls, comments on something, posts a video, or sends a picture of themselves to friends, they potentially broadcast themselves to the world.

Why Does It Matter?

Digital life is both public and permanent. Everything our teens do online creates digital footprints that migrate and persist. Something that happens on the spur of the moment – a funny picture, an angry post – can resurface years later. And if teens aren't careful, their reputations can be harmed. Your teen may think he or she just sent something to a friend, but that friend can send it to a friend's friend, who can send it to their friends' friends, and so on. That's how secrets become headlines, and how false information spreads fast and furiously. The stakes only increase when we remember that all of this takes place in front of a huge, invisible audience. Teens' deepest secrets can be shared with thousands of people they've never even met.

What Families Can Do

Do you really want everyone to know that about you?

Think about what parents of your friends might think of you if they saw that.

How do you think that person would feel if he/she later saw it someday?

common sense says

Help teens think long term. Explain to teens that everything leaves a digital footprint with information that can be searched and passed along to thousands of people. Others can pass on that information too, so if they don't want to see something tomorrow, they'd better not post it today.

Teach teens to keep personal information private. Help teens define which information is important for them to keep private when they're online. To start, we recommend that teens not share their addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.

Make sure your teens use privacy settings on their social network pages. Encourage teens to think carefully about the nature of their relationships (close friends, family, acquaintances, strangers) and adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

Remind teens to protect their friends' privacy. Passing along a rumor or identifying someone in a picture (called “tagging”) affects other people’s privacy. If your teen is uncomfortable being tagged in friends’ photos, they can ask to have the photos or the tags removed. But beyond that, there’s not too much they can do. So teach your teen that it’s better to check with friends first before posting something about them.

Remind teens that the Golden Rule applies online. While teens don’t always have control over what other people post of them, they can be proactive and help guide which snapshots of their lives are taken in the first place. What goes around comes around. If teens spread a rumor or talk badly about a teacher, they can’t assume that what they post will stay private. Whatever negative things they say can and probably will come back to haunt them, in more ways than they can imagine.