

Online Social Networking Information for Parents and 4-H Members

About Social Networking

Social Networking websites are increasingly popular, especially among teens, for connecting with friends. They provide an opportunity for self-expression, a forum for sharing ideas, and a social framework for connecting with new and old friends. Anyone who meets the age requirements can join these sites (usually for free) and create a profile. You can link your profile to the profiles of those you select as “friends”, creating a network of people with whom you can chat, share media, invite to events, and email. You can set up a profile as either an individual or as a group.

If parents are not familiar with these sites, some popular ones are:

MySpace.com: MySpace accounted for 81% of all social networking activity as of September, 2006. You must be at least 14 to join.

Facebook.com: Originally this site was for college students only, but it now accepts anyone over 13. Some features still cater to students.

Clubpenguin.com : “Waddle around and meet new friends!” This site, sponsored by Disney, has a monthly membership fee and a parent’s guide on the home page. You must be under 14 to have a profile.

Parent’s Responsibility

Parents should be aware of their children’s activities on the internet. Parents and members should agree on a set of rules for using computers and going on the Internet. Parents can, and should, check the computer’s Internet browser history to assure that the rules are being followed. Check your child’s social network sites periodically, and know the people with whom they are chatting. If parents need help understanding the risks or how to appropriately deal with them there are several good sites. Netsmartz.org is site is operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Wiredsafety.org a set of Internet sites for various online safety issues. The social networking sites also provide parent information and tips for keeping tabs on your children. They want you involved!

Parents should screen what their children post online, and make sure there is nothing there that they would not want a potential employer or college admissions officer to see (yes, they do check!) Parents and members should discuss what to do if an unknown person tries to contact them online or sends a “friend request”.

General Guidelines for Social Network Sites

The internet provides the opportunity for both a healthy, positive method of communication and also a potential risk. There are important safety guidelines that members and parents should follow when setting up a profile. The two biggest concerns are meeting people online who are not safe and posting information that does not belong in a public forum.

To prevent unknown people from obtaining personal information about youth block your page to people outside your friend’s network. Otherwise, all the information you post, such as your school and photos, are open to anyone. It is best NOT to post your last name, address, phone number, school name, locations youth hang out, or sports or other teams you are on. Because internet safety depends on youth exercising good judgment, the 4-H program does not endorse letting kids lie about their age in order to get a profile before they are old enough to join a particular site.

Cyber-bullying is an issue which is upsetting to youth and difficult to control. Spreading rumors about someone, posting harassing comments, and making threats are just as bad if done online as if they are done in person. Youth should report it to their parents if they are a victim of cyber-bullying. In extreme cases, such as a threat on a life or a sexual advance, parents should contact the local police.

4-H and Social Networking

The 4-H Program wants to make sure that when the 4-H name is used online, it is associated with our mission of promoting young people who will be tomorrow's leaders. Items posted which reflect badly on 4-H and the 4-H program are not in the best interest of 4-H will not be tolerated. Please follow these guidelines when referring to 4-H on your personal profile or creating a profile for a 4-H group or event.

If you are a 4-H member, we would love to see you mention your 4-H projects on your profile. However if, your personal expression does not follow the 4-H Code of Conduct do not mention the 4-H name on your profile. Keep your posts about 4-H safe: do not share detailed information about where your club meets on public profiles.

4-H Club and Event Profiles

You may establish a profile for a 4-H Club or a 4-H event. Since these sites are direct representations of the 4-H organization, it is especially important to follow these guidelines. Set up correctly, a 4-H group profile can be an excellent way for youth and adults to connect, talk, and share information, all from the comfort of their own homes.

Keep 4-H groups limited to only those people you designate as "friends". At least one adult should be visiting the site frequently to review postings. Make sure the membership requirements of the host site allow youth in the group to set up profiles. If most of your club members are under 14, they won't be able to use some sites! We encourage you to add your 4-H agent as a "friend" to all group profiles in your county.

Contact of 4-H youth and adults outside of the 4-H program

Parents should also be aware that the 4-H program is only responsible for the behavior of staff, volunteers and older youth leaders while they are participating in 4-H programs. We know that youth establish many healthy relationships with leaders in the 4-H program. That is what we want! We also want to be sure parents are involved with the youth members if they are to have contact with these persons outside the sanctioned program.

Consequences for problem 4-H sites

If the 4-H staff becomes aware of a problem with a web page that uses the 4-H name, you will be contacted with suggestions for how to bring your site in line with these guidelines. If you choose not to make the changes, then you will be asked to remove the reference to 4-H from your site or to erase the 4-H group profile. The 4-H Program has the right not to do business with anyone that is hostile to the organization.

We want the 4-H program and all its aspects to be a healthy, wholesome place for youth to learn and grow. Please communicate with your county 4-H agent if you have any questions or concerns about this information sheet or about any youth or club activities.