Privacy and Digital Footprints

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversation with parents about online privacy and reputation — also known as "Digital Footprint." Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the Privacy and Digital Footprints Parent/Teacher intro video and hand out the Privacy and Digital Footprints parent tip sheet to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions

1. Think about the different ways in which children share information about themselves on Internet. What excites you? What concerns you? What's at stake?
2. "Digital Footprint" refers to the fact that the information they post online is permanent, searchable, and can be copied and pasted into many different contexts. Do you think most kids understand this concept? What about adults?
3. What information is safe to make public online? Does context matter?
4. How can parents encourage their kids to self-reflect before they self-reveal?

What would you do?

Stories to discuss, role play, and deepen conversation

Elementary school child

Fiona has noticed that she's started to get lots of spam emails selling "cheat codes" to popular online games. She opens one of them and sees that it's addressed to her eight-year-old son, Brian. Fiona asks Brian why he's getting emails at her address, and if he's entered her email address into any online forms. "But mom, you won't let me have an email address and I needed one to enter a contest for free stuff on Club Penguin," he replies. He goes on to explain that he's filled out lots of sweepstakes forms, and has used her email address for them. She asks if the forms have requested other information, like his home address or phone number. He says that some have.

» What would you advise Fiona to say to her son in this situation?

» Aside from spam emails or telephone marketing calls, what are some other potential consequences of over-sharing personal information on the Internet that young kinds may not know about?

» Why might a kid think that giving an adult's personal information online is okay?

» Do you have family rules about your kids' online activity and the information they share with others? If so, what are they?

Middle school preteen or teen

Thirteen-year-old Sandra and her friend Katie got in a fight about a boy that they both like. Sandra went home feeling angry and tagged Katie in a very unflattering photo on Facebook that she knows Katie hates. In the photo Katie's bra is clearly visible — and so is her house number since it was taken in her front yard. The next day at school, a few boys start teasing Katie about the picture. She untagged herself and IMed Sandra to ask her to take the picture down. But Sandra is refusing to delete it since she's still mad.

» What should Katie do? If she involves her parents or teachers, what should they do?

» What are some of the potential consequences for having this picture appear online? Is it just embarrassing, or could it be dangerous too?

» Do you think that kids think about protecting their reputation online, or do they tend to live in the moment?

Fourteen year-old Jeff and his friend Jason are video bloggers, otherwise known as "vloggers." They have a channel on Youtube called "J & J Talk Sports" and it's becoming pretty popular among kids at their school. Like sports newscasters, the boys recount highlights of recent games on TV, share stats, and analyzing players' performances in front of a webcam. Jeff's mom is proud that the boys took the initiative to turn what was once just an idea into a full-blown hobby. She used to ask Jeff to show her each video before making it public, but the boys are making so many vlog posts nowadays that it's hard to keep track. She recently noticed that Jeff swore a few times in one of his videos last week, and decides it's time for a family chat.

» Is there a difference between Jeff swearing on a vlog and Jeff swearing on a blog in text? Why or why not?

» What should Jeff's parents discuss in their family meeting? What are some ground rules you would want to establish if you were Jeff's mom?

» Swearing aside, what are some topics that should remain off-limits for Jeff and Jason to discuss on their vlog?

High school teen

Jayden's mom teaches at his high school. While surfing on Facebook, Jayden discovers that his classmate Sean has an open profile. This means that even though they aren't officially friends on Facebook, Jayden can still see Sean's wall, photos, and information. Jayden notices that Sean updated his status last week to complain about his mom for assigning a lot of homework. Jayden also sees that his good friend Aaron commented in agreement on the status, using pretty strong language. This surprises Jayden, especially since Aaron used to carpool with him and his mom to school every day in middle school. Upset and annoyed, Jayden vents to his dad because he doesn't want to hurt his mom's feelings.

» What should Jayden's dad advise him to do?

» Do you think Aaron took Sean's privacy settings into consideration before commenting on his status? Would there be any way for him to know that Jayden might see what he wrote? Should it even matter?

» Today's youth feel empowered by being "digital natives", growing up with new media and learning about technology at a pace that's hard for adults to keep up with. How can parents talk to their kids about their online behavior, even if they don't really know how social networking sites, virtual worlds, or instant messaging work? What are some strategies?

Jeff has heard that college admissions officers sometimes search Google or social networks for applicants. He's never really worried that his daughter, Stacey, might be posting inappropriate stuff online, but since she's starting to apply to college, he decides to check. He finds a MySpace page that looks like she hasn't touched it in a few years, and it contains some posts about parties she went to as a freshman.

» How should Jeff approach Stacey about this?

» Some teens argue that everyone posts pictures of them partying — that's it the "new normal" — and that parents shouldn't freak out about it. Do you agree?

» Should parents check the digital footprints of their children? Do you?

» How do you explain to your kids that everything they post online could come back to haunt them some day?

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