



Keeping 4-H Youth Safe with Social Media

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The internet, in general, and social media specifically, can offer a sense of connectedness to those friends and family members with whom we are not able to connect during the quarantine. This is not to say that young people should have carte blanche to engage unrestricted online. However, instead here are a few things to consider ensuring that children are kept safe while engaging in social media.

Age Limits

Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube all require that users be 13 years old to have an account. Facebook has a “Messenger Kids” program that parents can sign their children up for in order to communicate with parent oversight.

Adult Supervision

Monitor your child’s internet usage (Strupeck, 2019). There are free filters that can be installed on your home network to ensure that usage is restricted to appropriate sites. Most cell phone service providers have a feature that can be installed on children’s phones to filter content and limit access.

While remotely monitoring and restricting access can be effective in the short term, in the long run, it is more beneficial to engage in regular discussions with your children about their online habits. Talk to them about the need for security. Have conversations about the notion that once information is put out online, it is nearly impossible to truly take it down. Before any child is allowed to move about on the internet untethered, they need to understand the importance of privacy and what information needs to be kept private, including addresses, age, real names, email addresses, and the like. B4U Click (2020) recommends parents:

- **Block websites** – stops children from seeing or using certain types of websites
- **Set time limits** – keeps track of how long your child is using the Internet so you can manage appropriate time limits
- **Search result filtering** – filters out adult or inappropriate websites, images, videos, and other content from popular search engines like Google and Bing
- **Instant alerts** – sends you an instant alert if your child tries to access inappropriate or blocked content online
- **Reporting tools** – allows you to instantly report malicious or inappropriate content, spam, or abuse

Gaming

Online social activity is not restricted to texting, emailing, Snapchat, Instagram, and other such tools. Children today are exposed to contact with others through console-based and phone-based video games as well. Communication with your child about her gaming habits is key. Talk to her about what she is doing to keep herself and her information safe.

Encourage Breaks

Just like adults, when a child has been at something that they find engaging, they tend to lose track of time. Encourage them to take breaks throughout the day. Read a book, watch a movie together, do a puzzle, record a demonstration video for 4-H, just something to break up the day and find joy in engagement elsewhere.

Learning Opportunities

Think of ways to make social media educational. In 4-H, we pride ourselves on learning by doing and the experiential learning process. A big part of this process is not only finding that area of interest, that “spark” that drives us, but then learning as much about it as possible. There are countless videos on YouTube created by subject matter experts that young people can use to learn more about their topic. When they are researching to learn more about something, ask them questions like, “Why is this video a good source?” “How do you know that this person is knowledgeable on the topic?”. Probing questions will help them to think critically about the information that they are taking in and become better researchers in the future.

Facebook has groups dedicated to a myriad of different topics. Encourage your children to participate in the groups that are of interest to them, but remember to talk about what they are seeing and posting. It might be a good idea to join together so that you can have a shared experience.

Instagram is a great place for young people to share pictures, short videos, and descriptions of the things about which they are passionate. It is also a great place to go to follow and interact with experts in those fields.

TikTok is a great tool for youth to use to demonstrate what they have learned in a short 60 second format as well as to find and watch similar videos using hashtags to search based on areas of interest. Using these will help to limit exposure to potentially unwanted videos.

Security

The services mentioned above are by no means intended to be a comprehensive list of what is available for young people to use. No matter what they are using to interact with the world over the internet, we need to make sure that their experience is as secure as possible. Every service that they use can be set up in such a way as to restrict access to one extent or another, limiting people outside of their immediate circle from accessing what they post and share.

Communication is Key

In conclusion, please remember that communication is key. Make sure to have conversations with your children about what they are seeing and doing online. Try to maintain a level head as reacting with shock or anger could discourage future willingness to engage in such conversation. Instead, ask them if they feel that what they see is appropriate, and ask them for ideas for how they could be better protected.

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