Setting Social Media Boundaries for your Kids

My parents won't let me have fb (Facebook) because employers might not hire me :(The worst part about it is that my dad gets really defensive and lives on pride so even if he realizes i'm right, he still won't let me. They're killing my social life ;(
--Nicki (blog commenter)

Whether it's the advent of the novel, the introduction of rock and roll, television, or now, social media, one constant remains: every up-and-coming generation embraces "new fangled inventions" while their parents struggle to accept and understand these "modern" changes. In fact, many parents avoid the tech talk because they don't feel confident in their knowledge of this new social media world. However, ignoring this new frontier won't make it disappear; rather, it can expose your kids to problems, predators and privacy breaches. Get a handle on your child's online activities and:

Know the rules. Facebook restricts accounts to those 13 and older, so if your tween is bugging you about signing up, you may be able to hold them off for a year or two with this information. Twitter, however, does not have the same restrictions. If your child insists on getting social online sooner rather than later, consider more secure and age appropriate sites designed for younger kids.

Spell out the risks. Kids learn to be wary of strangers in person, but they also need to know how to avoid befriending strangers online. Explain the dangers of online predators and restrict kids to only connecting online with people they know in real life. Also check that they aren't giving away too much information on their public profile, such as their school name, birthday or phone number, which could open the door to predators.

Explain the consequences. Kids live in the here and now and often don't consider the impact of posting a mean message or a photo down the line. Explain that every item they post, and every piece of information they share will literally last a lifetime and can come back to haunt them. A good rule of thumb: if your kid wouldn't discuss or show something to their entire class, they shouldn't share it online. Consider getting your kids to sign a social media agreement, which clearly lays out your expectations and sets some defined ground rules.

Hang out in the background. Ensure you "follow" or "friend" your child to track their online activity. Insist on knowing their account user names and passwords; if they text regularly, take a peek at their conversations every now and again. Avoid being an overly-active friend online though, as you not only risk publicly embarrassing your kids in front of all of their friends, but you also risk pushing them into creating a "secret account" you're not aware of.

Keep an open door. Encourage your children to tell you if they're being bullied online or if some activity they see just feels wrong. Also, suggest they come to you if they're not sure about whether or not it's okay to post a photo or information. The more open and available you are, the more likely they'll be to approach you with a challenge, problem or concern.

Enforce the rules. If your child breaks the rules you've agreed on, then ensure you follow through with the consequences you've clearly laid out beforehand (e.g., shutting down an account, taking away their mobile phone for a week, etc.). Be fair but strong so that kids know exactly what to expect if they violate your agreement.

YouTube – to post or not to post

Whether your child is having an amusing temper tantrum or performing an incredible rendition of today's hottest pop song, more and more parents are publicly sharing their children's experiences with the virtual world. But given that the Internet is forever, is this really something proud moms and dads should be doing? Before hitting the YouTube "post" button, ask yourself if:

- **The video really needs a larger audience.** Would it be more appropriate to send out a private channel link to aunts, uncles, grandma and grandpa?

- **Your child will be embarrassed by the video when they grow up.** Permanently erasing an online video is close to impossible.

- **Others will think you're exploiting your child** or living vicariously through them. Yes, some talented kids are discovered online, but it's a rare occurrence. At the end of the day, are you sharing your child's talent or your own secret desire for fame and fortune?

- **You're potentially violating your child's privacy** or exposing them to harmful scrutiny. Remember, your job as a parent is to protect your kids; not put them in harm's way.

Net Numbers

- 98 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds used the Internet in 2009.

- 86 per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds have a social networking profile compared with 62 per cent of 35 to 54-year-olds and 43 per cent of people older than 54.

- 201 Facebook friends is the average amongst teen users of the site.

- 47 per cent of parents feel overwhelmed with their teen's online safety.

- 43 per cent of teens would change how they acted online if their parents were tracking them.