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# Social Networking Challenges Every Parent Should Know

## A Guide to Keeping Your Child Safe Online

Based on research by ContentWatch / Net Nanny, in partnership with Focus on the Family | Prepared for our school community

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Social media is now woven into the everyday lives of children and teens. Alongside the genuine benefits of connection and creativity come very real risks — risks that every parent deserves to understand clearly and without alarm.

**54%** of children aged 8–15 already have a social networking profile. And **50%** of parents with children aged 5–15 feel their child knows *more* about the internet than they do. That gap matters — and it is exactly why conversations like this one are so important.

This handout is not meant to frighten — it is meant to **equip**. As parents, our most powerful tools are knowledge and open conversation. The eleven challenges below are presented plainly, along with a simple action step for each. You don't need to be a technology expert to keep your child safer online. You just need to stay engaged.

## 11 Challenges Every Parent Should Know

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### 1. The Big Picture: Are Parents Keeping Up?

#### The Risk

Parental control software use has actually *declined* in recent years, even as children's internet access has grown. Many parents rely on trust or casual

observation — but children almost always understand technology better than the adults around them, which means unsupervised access is riskier than most families realize.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Install parental controls on *every* device your child uses. Free options such as Apple Screen Time and Google Family Link are excellent starting points and take only minutes to set up.

## **2. Self-Esteem and Social Comparison**

### **The Risk**

Social media can be a double-edged sword for a child's sense of worth. While some kids enjoy crafting a positive online image, many more feel diminished when they constantly compare their real, ordinary lives to the carefully curated highlight reels of friends, celebrities, and influencers.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Talk regularly with your child about what they see online. Remind them that social media shows the best moments — not the whole truth. Most importantly, ground their identity in real relationships, especially within your family and faith community.

## **3. Age Restrictions Are Being Ignored**

### **The Risk**

Facebook, Instagram, and most major platforms require users to be at least 13 years old — but millions of younger children have accounts anyway, simply by entering a false birth date. Once registered with an incorrect age, a child may be exposed to adult content and targeted advertising as time passes.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Check whether your child has accounts on any platform and verify the age they registered. Have an honest conversation about why age limits exist — they are

there to protect them, not to punish them.

#### **4. Depression and Mental Health**

##### **The Risk**

Multiple studies link heavy social media use in children and teens to increased rates of depression and anxiety, particularly among girls. The constant cycle of comparison, seeking likes, and responding to social pressure creates real and lasting emotional strain at a critical stage of development.

##### **✓ What You Can Do**

Watch for changes in your child's mood, sleep patterns, or willingness to spend time with the family. Set clear daily limits on screen time, and actively encourage offline hobbies, physical activity, and in-person friendships.

#### **5. Online Predators**

##### **The Risk**

Predators actively seek out children through social media, online games, and chat apps — often posing as peers. They build trust gradually and patiently before attempting to arrange real-world meetings or requesting inappropriate content from a child.

##### **✓ What You Can Do**

Teach your child never to share personal details online — full name, school name, home address, or phone number. Help them understand that online "friends" are still strangers until they have been met in person with a parent present.

#### **6. Cyberbullying**

##### **The Risk**

Bullying has moved online — and it now follows children home around the clock.

Anonymous comments, rumors spread through group chats, and public shaming on social platforms can cause serious emotional harm. Victims often suffer in silence rather than tell a trusted adult.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Teach your child to block and report bullying behavior immediately. Make sure they know they can come to you without fear of losing their devices. If bullying occurs, document it before deleting anything — a screenshot can be important later.

## **7. Online Criminals and Scams**

### **The Risk**

Children are increasingly targeted by online criminals through fake giveaways, phishing messages, and gaming scams. Because kids are naturally trusting and less skeptical than adults, they can be easy targets for identity theft and even financial fraud.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Teach children a simple rule: if something online seems too good to be true, it is. They should never click unknown links, share passwords, or enter personal information without a parent's knowledge and approval.

## **8. Hiding Behavior**

### **The Risk**

Children who fear punishment for what they do online will simply hide it — through private accounts, deleted histories, or apps specifically designed to conceal other apps. Hidden behavior is a warning sign that warrants a conversation, not just a consequence.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Frame regular phone check-ins as a normal family habit, not a punishment. Work to make your home a safe place for your child to come forward when something goes wrong online. The goal is trust, not surveillance.

## **9. Privacy: It's Harder to Protect Than You Think**

### **The Risk**

Even accounts set to "private" can expose more than a child intends. Location tags embedded in photos, publicly visible friend lists, and third-party apps connected to a social account can quietly reveal personal information to strangers.

### **✓ What You Can Do**

Sit down with your child and review their privacy settings together — make it a shared activity, not an inspection. Turn off location tagging in photos, and check which third-party apps have access to their social accounts.

## **10. College Admissions and Future Consequences**

### **The Risk**

What a child posts today can surface years from now. College admissions officers and future employers routinely search applicants online. A photo, comment, or video posted at age 11 or 13 can still be found when that same child applies to college or for a job at 18 or 22.

### **✓ What You Can Do**

Introduce your child (even now) to the idea of an online reputation. A simple, memorable rule: never post anything you wouldn't want a grandparent — or a college admissions dean — to see.

## **11. Dangerous Online Friendships**

### **The Risk**

Children naturally seek connection and belonging — but online "friendships" are not always what they appear to be. Kids can be drawn into relationships with people they have never met, relationships that may become emotionally manipulative or

lead to unsafe real-world situations.

✓ **What You Can Do**

Ask your child regularly about their online friends — who they are, how they met, and what they talk about. Gently encourage your child to connect online only with people they already know in real life.

## Conversation Starters for Parents

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Not sure how to bring this up at home? Try one of these warm, non-confrontational questions over dinner or during a car ride. You don't have to use all five at once — one good conversation is a wonderful start.

 **Try Asking Your Child This Week:**

1. *"Who do you talk to online? Are any of them people you've never actually met in real life?"*
2. *"Has anything online ever made you feel bad about yourself, or upset you? I really want to know — you can tell me."*
3. *"If someone online offered you something amazing — a prize, free game items, a gift card — what would you do?"*
4. *"Do you know what cyberbullying is? Has anyone ever treated you badly online, or have you seen it happen to someone else?"*
5. *"Can we look at your privacy settings together sometime? I just want to make sure you're protected."*

## Quick Action Checklist — This Week

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Here are eight practical steps you can take right now. You don't have to do them all at once — even one or two this week makes a real difference.

- Install parental controls on all devices your child uses (Apple Screen Time / Google Family Link are free and easy)
- Review and adjust privacy settings on every social account your child has
- Turn off location tagging in your child's camera app and social apps
- Do a "phone check-in" together — browse apps, friends lists, and recent activity as a team
- Check the age your child registered on any social platforms they use
- Establish a family screen time agreement with clear, agreed-upon daily limits
- Move device charging stations to a common area — not bedrooms overnight
- Have at least one conversation this week using the starters listed above

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As parents, we are our children's first and most important guide — online and offline. The goal of all of this is not fear or restriction; it is **wisdom, trust, and open communication**. Stay curious about your child's digital world, keep the lines of conversation open, and remind them often: you are on their side, always — no matter what they encounter online or off.

*"Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."*

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Proverbs 22:6

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Questions? Please speak with your child's teacher or our school administrator — we are happy to help.

Source: ContentWatch / Net Nanny, in partnership with Focus on the Family | [netnanny.com](http://netnanny.com) | Additional resources: [netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org) • [focusonthefamily.com](http://focusonthefamily.com)