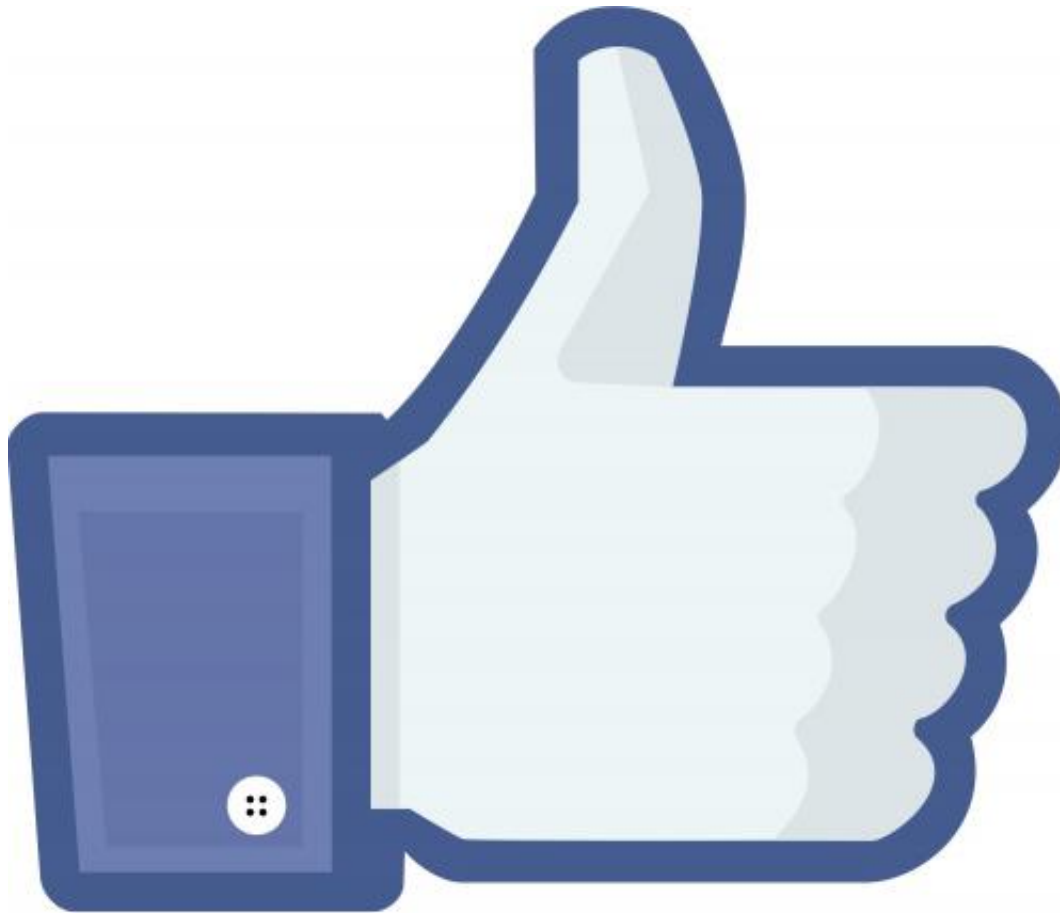


Opinion: At what age should kids start social networking?

August 23 2015, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News



With my eldest kid entering middle school this fall, he and my wife and I were anxious about a lot of things.

A new school. Unfamiliar faces. Changing classes. Letter grades. The PE locker room. Advanced math. The specters of gangs, drugs and bullying.

What wasn't on my mind at all was [social media](#). It is now.

At an orientation session before school started, one of the assistant principals urged [parents](#) to get on top of their kids use of social networking. He didn't go into the specifics of the problems he'd seen. But he noted that what happens online can affect children's school lives, and it's much harder for school administrators to moderate.

To get an idea of how to approach my kid's use of [social networking](#), I chatted with other parents and with a bunch of different [experts](#). Their main bit of advice: good parenting in the social media age looks a lot like good parenting in general. Being honest with your children, keeping the lines of communication open and modeling good behavior can go a long way toward ensuring that kids are safe and responsible on social media.

The first big question I and other parents have about social media is the age at which it's appropriate for kids to sign on. As with many things about social media, there are no hard and fast rules.

Many sites and services nominally bar children under 13 from signing up. But that has more to do with complying with a federal law intended to protect the privacy of young kids than it does any real sense of what's appropriate for particular age groups. Still, some experts say 13 is a good baseline to use for adult-oriented social networks like Facebook and Twitter. But the actual age will vary from child to child. Some may be ready to handle such sites at a younger age, while others may not be ready until they're well into their teenage years.

"Simply turning 13 doesn't mean your child is ready for social media," said Augusta Nissly, a program coordinator at the Family Online Safety

Institute. "It's more important to talk to your kids and assess their maturity."

Another thing to assess is the risks. There have been plenty of news reports playing up the fears of predators stalking kids online. Experts say those stories are overblown and such incidences are exceedingly rare. But newer apps like Tinder and Facebook Messenger can show the location of users with near pinpoint accuracy and raise new questions about privacy.

For now, though, parents ought to be more concerned about their children's interactions with their peers, experts say. Cyberbullying may not be rampant, but it's common. Embarrassing or compromising pictures can be posted in public forums without their subjects' consent. Kids can feel left out or slighted when their friends or classmates get together without them. And poorly written posts can lead to misunderstandings and bad feelings that carry over to the school grounds.

Parents need to recognize that kids' brains - particularly the parts that control impulses and govern emotions - are still developing. If adults have a disagreement, the way they deal with it ideally is to talk about it privately, not trash each other online, noted Annie Fox, a parenting expert and the author of "Teaching Kids to be Good People."

"That's just common sense. But it's not common sense for kids," Fox said.

So what should parents do? Experts like Fox say it's unrealistic and unproductive to try to block kids from social media entirely. Like most communication tools, social media has lots of good things to offer kids, such as allowing them to keep and maintain friendships or allowing them to connect with peers of similar interests. Services like Facebook,

Snapchat and Instagram are becoming as important to kids today as the phone in my room was to me 30 years ago.

Many experts also warn against taking a heavy hand in monitoring kids' online activities, such as parents insisting that their children connect to them on social media or demanding to know their passwords or have access to their texts. It's relatively easy for kids to thwart such monitoring by setting up new accounts that are hidden from their parents.

Instead, experts encourage parents to talk with their kids about their social media use, about the risks involved and about what's appropriate to post and what's not. It's also important for parents to encourage their children to talk with them about things that happen online that make them feel uncomfortable or upset.

It's also crucial for parents to set a good example for their [children](#), both online and off. Kids learn a lot from how their parents handle technology and situations. It's going to be much harder for a parent to get a kid to put his phone down at the dinner table if the parent never puts hers down. Another good idea for parents: Getting to know the apps and services your kids use. Parents should understand and be able to explain to their kids how the apps work, who can see the information they're posting and how to restrict access to that data.

And finally, it's important for parents to set general expectations and boundaries. One standard rule used to be that the computer [kids](#) use ought to be in a family space so parents can keep an eye on their activities. That's harder to do in the age of smartphones and tablets, but parents can insist that such devices be used in the public areas of the house or only during certain hours.

"Every parent needs to talk about what is appropriate and what isn't,"

said Larry Magid, CEO of ConnectSafely who also writes a regular column for the San Jose Mercury News. "It's a matter of instilling values."

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