

# Help Kids Make Friends and Interact Safely Online

So much of kids' social lives happens online. Whether they're texting with their study group, flirting on social media, or voice-chatting on game platforms, middle and high schoolers can learn to communicate in safe and healthy ways. These skills will help kids -- and the people they're communicating with -- have positive experiences online.

Check out these 4 tips 

1

## ***Give them the right words.***

Kids learn about appropriate verbal and physical communication from watching you. But online conversations can be invisible. Occasionally, narrate as you're writing texts or social media comments when your kids are in earshot.

2

## ***Learn about their worlds.***

Tweens and teens have unique communication styles—especially online. As much as possible, keep an eye on what they're saying and doing online to understand the norm in their worlds. Don't police everything they say, but keep an ear out for aggressive trash-talking, hate speech, rude images, or anything hurtful. If you see stuff that crosses the line, speak up. Kids need to understand that their words have consequences.

3

## ***Empathize with the pressure to overshare.***

Tweens and teens might feel pushed into sharing a sexy photo for different reasons: a dare, fear of damaging a relationship, or just because "everyone else is doing it." But this one is nonnegotiable. Tell them that you understand how bad it can feel to disappoint a friend. Then help them imagine how much worse it would feel if a private picture were shared with their whole school.

4

## ***Develop their instincts.***

Help kids learn to trust their guts so they can suss out creepy, risky, or otherwise unsafe online situations. Playact a few scenarios: What if someone asks to take a conversation private? What if someone asks for your phone number? What if someone invites you to a private chat room? Be aware that some kids (even "good" kids) will explore iffy stuff online out of curiosity. But the minute they feel uncomfortable, they need to shut things down.



# What can I do for my social media-obsessed teen?

For most teens, their social lives are the most important thing. While many teens **report positive experiences with social media**, including making new friends, feeling more connected to their friends, and getting support from online pals, it can be **anxiety-producing, too**. Common Sense Media's Census found that **lots of teens use social media every day, but they don't like it as much as they like other media**. That may indicate that they feel pressured to stay on top of their social lives so they're not left out.

Try to suss out your teen's feelings about social media. If she's always on it due to FOMO (fear of missing out), she feels worse after using it, and it's affecting other areas of her life, it may be time to step in. Try to limit her use and help her gain perspective by getting her involved in other activities. She might even enjoy other online social sites that are productive and positive, such as movie and book fan sites or social sites such as Pinterest, which are less about collecting likes or fans. If she's feeling depressed or has other signs of anxiety (withdrawal from social or family activities, falling grades, a dramatic change in behavior), contact your pediatrician for help.

# Should I be concerned about my teen's constant multitasking during homework?

Many teens multitask with media while doing their homework, and most of them think this has no effect on the quality of their work. **Consider the stats:**

- 51% of teens say they often or sometimes watch TV during homework.
- 50% often or sometimes use social media while doing homework.
- 60% often or sometimes text during homework.
- 76% often or sometimes listen to music during homework. (In fact, 50% of teens think listening to music helps their work vs. 6% who think it hurts.)

But, despite what kids think and do, frequently using several devices at a time affects the ability to focus. **Productivity suffers when switching rapidly between different tasks because the brain has to re-focus every time it switches to a new activity.** Over time, heavy multitaskers can also have trouble with face-to-face conversations.

The challenge for parents is figuring out what's normal (but frustrating) teen behavior and what are truly unhealthy study habits. Listening to music while doing homework seems harmless, but many studies have shown that **listening to popular music** with lyrics can hurt reading comprehension and the ability to do complex tasks, but that more "zen-like" and classical music does not. But if your teens' academics are slipping, that's a red flag. Discuss your concerns and talk about ways to structure homework time, such as turning off cell phones and TV for a certain amount of time or allowing kids to check their texts only after they complete each assignment. Consider asking your kids to write down assignments and have them check each off as they finish them. Maybe offer rewards for finishing in a timely manner, since multitasking tends to make homework time drag on.

If your kid is really having a tough time blocking out distractions and staying focused, you might need some technical assistance. If your kid's school uses a 1-to-1 device program, ask the teacher if it comes with some time-management software or other controls that allow you to restrict access to non-homework-related sites. If your kid is using your home computer to do work, you might consider **a parental-control program** such as OpenDNS or KidsWatch that lets you separate homework from playtime.