

# Online Safety

The Internet is amazing! But it also has some things you need to watch out for.

## Who Are You Online?

You're always you, of course. But if you use a smartphone, tablet, or computer to play games and text with friends, you also have an online identity. Games and websites might let you create a profile picture that represents you. It's fun to dress up that character and maybe give it a sense of style you'd never try at school.

Apps and websites also let you choose your own username. If you want to be known as King\_of\_Ketchup, that's your new name. So if you start calling yourself the King of Ketchup, does that mean you really like ketchup? Should you tell your new online friends how much you love ketchup? That's up to you, but it brings up a good point: How much should you share about your real self online?

You may feel fine telling your best friends about your biggest crush, but what if the whole school could see your poem about your crush's beautiful eyes? What if strangers could see it?

There are rules about being online, just like there are rules about what you do and say in other places. It's important you learn the rules so you can play safely online.

## Keep Your Privacy

Anybody who uses the Internet has been asked to sign in, log in, or create a profile. Kids need to check with a parent or grown-up before doing so. Why? This information could be used for reasons you wouldn't like, like getting a lot of junk email.

Another word about email: If you have your own account, let your mom or dad know before you reply to email that asks for your personal information. Some email looks official, but it's actually a trick to get your personal info.

Another way to keep your privacy is to choose a screen name or email account name that isn't your real name. For instance, instead of "Jack\_Smith," why not choose "Sk8boardKing21"? Only your friends and family will know your code name!

## Social Media and Strangers

Maybe you're allowed to use your phone to send texts or watch videos. As you get older, you might get interested in social media sites. These usually have a minimum age (13 years), but many kids look at these sites before they're 13.

Social media sites let you text, share photos, play online games with friends, and tell people as much or as little about yourself as you want. But they also can let you meet strangers. It might seem fun to make new friends, but do not communicate with strangers you meet online. Don't talk to them, agree to phone them, or email them photos of yourself.

To a kid, this can seem kind of silly. The writer might seem really nice and tell you how you sound really smart and cute. Unfortunately, kids have been tricked online by people who pretend to be something that they're not. Someone might lie and say they're in sixth grade too, when they're really all grown up. Some kids have found themselves in a dangerous situation when they agreed to meet the mysterious online "friend" in person.

Let your parents know if a stranger emails you, sends a text message, or starts a conversation with you online. A grown-up should decide what's best to do, which may include changing your email address or telling the police. In general, if you're thinking about creating an account on a social media site, talk with your mom or dad first.

## Online Bullying

When you're using the computer, it can be tempting to hide behind a username to play a joke on someone by teasing the person or pretending to be someone else. Or maybe you're angry with someone and it's easier to say something mean if the person doesn't know it's you.

Just like in the real world, it's mean and hurtful to do stuff like that online. Even if you're only kidding, they might not know that you're only joking and they might be very hurt or angry by what you said. It's a lonely feeling when you don't know who's messing with you. Is it someone just being funny or does the person really mean it?

Whether they're strangers or friends, the rule is: **Be kind online.** Schools, teachers, and parents are all getting stricter about what is OK or not OK to send as a message on your phone or computer.

Here's a good test: If you wouldn't say it to someone's face, don't say it to the person on the computer. And just like with regular bullying, tell a grownup if you or someone you know is being upset in this way.

## Rules to Follow

If you're a kid who likes to have fun and chat with friends online, here's how you can stay safe and avoid problems:

**Stick to safer sites.** Your parents and teachers can guide you to the best sites for you. Some sites have age restrictions, so you might be tempted to lie about your age. It's safer to tell the truth and avoid those sites until you're older.

**Guard your passwords.** If someone can sign in as you, you have no control over what they do or say. And everyone will think it's you! So don't share your passwords with anyone except your parents.

**Limit what you share.** Never tell a stranger where you live or your phone number. If you're not sure if you should share something, ask a parent. Remember that anything you put online or post on a site is there forever, even if you try to delete it. If you wouldn't want your entire class to know or see something, you shouldn't share it with anyone online, not even your best friends.

**Don't be mean or embarrass other people online.** Just like you, there's a real person attached to that screen name who has feelings too.

**Always tell if you see strange or bad online behavior.** Tell an adult right away if someone says something to you that makes you uncomfortable. Also tell an adult if you see anyone bullying or saying strange stuff to other kids.

**Be choosy about your online friends.** Some sites let kids make lots of friends with people they don't know. But online friends are not the same as real in-person friends. Never agree to meet an online friend in person or give out personal information about yourself. It's dangerous because some people pretend to be kids online but actually are creepy adults.

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