

Catholic Parenting 101

Navigating Online Social Networks

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Online social networks have unleashed gale-force winds that are sweeping, and reshaping, the social landscape for our children. Gone are the days when we could protect our children from “bad influences” by supervising who called or came to visit. Today, parents must help their kids skillfully navigate the landscape of online social networking.

An informed and confident response from parents goes a long way toward helping children to utilize the positive benefits of social networking while minimizing any potential vulnerability from such open virtual forums.

Positive Opportunities

Many parents focus on negative aspects of online social networks. These platforms are not necessarily portals designed to erode strong Catholic family values. Parents who outright ban their children from these online social environments are rejecting a legitimate social avenue for building healthy relationships. Often extreme parental decisions can unleash harsh and unwanted consequences. Children are not only blocked from the dark side of social networking, but they are also blocked from positive opportunities. Appropriate online social networks offer children a wide range of positive interactions, including

- ▶ opportunities to share their faith openly,
- ▶ maintaining contact with good friends and family who live out of town,
- ▶ participating in helpful virtual study groups, and receiving invitations to parties with positive peer influences.



Strategy #1: Clarify the Purpose

Parents should state clearly upfront a social network is solely to stay connected with friends and family. Some basic rules include:

- ▶ Children should only connect with people whom they have met in person. All connections to networks and groups must have a real-life interaction, such as at school, church, or local community groups. Only parents should be permitted to make an exception.
- ▶ Parents should regularly review and discuss their children’s “friend” list.
- ▶ Children should be discouraged from browsing profiles of people who are not their friends, including friends of friends, until they meet them in person with parental approval.
- ▶ When children violate these rules they should be prepared to face more stringent monitoring and/or loss of online time.



Strategy #2: Control Personal Information

Parents should ensure that their children control personal information. Social networking sites provide settings to control personal information, yet they expect users to take responsibility in protecting that information. In addition, most of these sites reserve the right to sell collected data to marketing companies and, unless caution is exercised, children could be exposed to marketing schemes and/or predators. Parents cannot stress enough the profound negative consequences that are possible once personal information has been posted—once it is posted it can never be retracted. Some basic rules include:

- ▶ Children should only post information that they would be comfortable sharing with their grandparents.
- ▶ If children are in high school, they should post information only if they would be comfortable sharing with future college admissions boards and employers. Today most employers routinely (and legally) review personal profiles of potential employees prior to hiring.
- ▶ Children should be required to set their privacy settings to only those family members and friends with whom they are directly connected. This will restrict who can see their information and collect data.

- ▶ Children should also be encouraged to leave fields blank when filling out their biographies and the like. Telephone numbers and addresses should never be posted online. These boundaries are also important when playing games online. Many of these applications are designed to collect data and personal information from users to be used by marketing companies.

Strategy #3: Monitor Activity

Parents need to monitor their children's social network use actively. Some basic rules include:

- ▶ In the case of social media platforms, a parent should have a personal account and should be connected to the accounts of his or her children.
- ▶ When a parent chooses to view their children's account, they should inform their children that they will be monitoring all online activity.
- ▶ Parents can either use personal passwords to log onto a platform or purchase monitoring software that will capture all online activity.

There is no question that online social networking is here to stay. With such technology comes the opportunity to mentor children not only to stay clear of danger, but to build healthy and holy relationships and share their faith with others.