Your tech whiz children may not be able to mind themselves online

Social media can make youngsters, whose emotions are already in turmoil, anxious

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When your child has joined a website, talk about having a think-before-you-post policy. Have them think about everyone in their school reading the post before they decide to make it public

 When I was a kid, the contact I had with my friends was mostly face-to-face or with grudging parental consent, on the family phone. Today’s youngsters can communicate with each other at any time of the day or night with the flick of a button, or more precisely, the swipe of a screen.

In some ways this can be positive, as it allows them to keep abreast of each other’s movements, but on the other hand, it can also be very damaging as the very nature of social media creates a competitive atmosphere as children try to outdo each other with photographs and descriptions of outfits, activities and, the most troublesome, events to which certain friends are excluded from.

At its most innocent, social media can cause an awful lot of anxiety for youngsters, whose emotions are already in turmoil due to rising hormone levels, as they fret about posts which infer exciting things have been happening in their absence or more worryingly, are either a victim or perpetrator of cyber-bullying.

Senior child psychologist [Peadar Maxwell](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Peadar%20Maxwell&article=true) agrees.

“I saw a post from one newspaper recently about refugees being settled in Roscommon and the first comment was xenophobic by most people’s standards,” he says. “The comments that followed were equally crude and unwelcoming. Then I noticed the same news story in a different newspaper and followed the comments to see what was said. While most were mixed, the first comment was empathetic and those which followed were written in much less incendiary language. Researchers have often pointed to this phenomenon where one teenager makes fun of a picture and then others feel it’s okay to follow in the same tone.

“Equally some young people read (what are probably unauthentic feelings and thoughts) about how another teen is such a legend, some party was unreal or felt that everyone seemed so happy, dressed-up and popular in their photos – they then come offline feeling they are not as popular, attractive or having as much fun as others. Events which used to be private such as having a few friends over are published for the world to see and although they may not be a big deal, they can make some youngsters feel even more excluded.”

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The Wexford-based psychologist says parents should pay heed to the minimum age limits on certain social media networks as aside from having the potential for creating angst, some sites will display content which is not suitable for children or young teens.

“Many networks have a minimum age limit of 18 as users can post pictures, videos or text that most parents wouldn’t find suitable for their children,” he says. “This doesn’t stop youngsters signing up, with fake birth dates and mostly with parents’ knowledge, but it should be in a parent’s awareness that the minimum age is there for a reason.

“Generally speaking, children begin to assert their independence and develop curiosity and some understanding of the greater world by about 13 and by first or second year, most are members of one or more social media platforms . They should be encouraged to stay away from as many social media sites as long as possible until they learn how to mind themselves in real life and then apply those skills online rather than the other way round. And parents should not conclude that because their child is a technology whiz, they can mind themselves online.”

Maxwell says there are a number of reasons why being online too early can be bad for children, including:

**1.** Meeting unsavoury characters;

**2.** Getting into dramas with friends that could inadvertently turn into a bullying situation or where someone is hurt;

**3.** Becoming overly reliant on social networking for interaction and engagement;

**4.** Uncensored thoughts are posted and cannot be taken back;

**5.** Children do not develop their social skills in a face-to-face way which leads to a better understanding of others and their feelings. There’s a saying, “The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said” and too much communication without tone of voice, eye contact and facial expressions robs young people of the chance to develop the art of conversation;

**6.** For some youngsters, social media gives them a licence to be mean to others;

**7.**If devices in general are overly used, they can reduce family communication, which is not a positive thing.

While there are some pitfalls, though, there are also many positives, according to the expert in child psychology. “Social networks can be a fun way to stay in contact especially for children and adolescents separated from some family members,” he says. “It is another way to become comfortable with technology and there are support groups online for causes and conditions which may help some young people – so it is less about good versus evil and more about education and supervision.

“Deciding which platform your child can use when you think they are ready is difficult. But use the same rules we have for socialising in person and ensure your child is mainly with others of about the same age and has some level of supervision.”

**STAYING SAFE ONLINE**

– Choose a site that is less adult-oriented and make sure you agree in advance that you can be their (non-invasive) follower or friend.

– When you are ready to allow your child to join a network, agree on fair access in advance, not when they are hooked on checking on it all day long.

– Together investigate the network, have a look at the types of profiles and posts being posted, see what is being advertised on the site and become informed of the privacy settings available.

– When your child has joined, talk about having a think-before-you-post policy. At least alert her or him to the idea of thinking about everyone in your town or their school reading the post before they decide to make it public.

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– Discuss keeping what should be private information just that – private.

– Talk about being respectful to others and not getting dragged into fights online.

– Casually role-play how they could react if they see or experience cyber-bullying or inappropriate content of any type. In other words, prepare them in advance. – After a few weeks of being on the site, your child will think they are an expert and be less likely to seek your advice, so discuss this in advance.

– Encourage screen breaks and breaks from any site or online game on which your child has experienced unwelcome contact.