

# What every parent needs to know about Facebook

April 30, 2010 Toronto Star

**NANCY J. WHITE**

LIVING REPORTER

A 13-year-old boy bragged to his friends that his parents were out and he had the house to himself. That might sound innocent enough, except he did it on Facebook, where his personal information was open to the site's millions of users.

That's just one example of youngsters toying with trouble that social media strategist Lisa McKenzie and her colleagues stumbled on while exploring Facebook.

"We found kids writing dangerous posts, slamming teachers and bosses, and building a digital footprint that will make it difficult for them to get into a school or land a job," says McKenzie, an author of *Facebook Guide for Parents*.

McKenzie, 43, a founder of Supreme Social Media, which creates tutorials, how-to books and videos, spoke to the *Star* from her Montreal home about privacy settings, Google Alerts and precocious preteens.

**Q: By the time parents catch up to a form of social media such as Facebook, haven't kids moved on to something else?**

**A:** No. Facebook has 400 million users and the numbers aren't going down. It's the most popular of all social networks.

**Q: Should parents be monitoring kids on Facebook?**

**A:** Our theory is that parents should be seen and not necessarily heard. It's like going to a big party with your child. You don't hover. They hang out with their friends and you with yours. But every once in awhile you pop your head in to make sure everything is okay.

**Q: Don't kids deserve privacy?**

**A:** Absolutely, if they are not at risk. If they understand the etiquette and that what they write can come back to bite them.

**Q: How young are kids joining Facebook?**

**A:** You have to be 13 to have a Facebook profile. But it's easy for children to lie. They change their birth year. There are plenty of children as young as 8 on Facebook.

**Q: What about privacy settings on a Facebook profile? What's crucial to know?**

**A:** You should be aware that you don't have to fill out all the information on the form when you're setting up a profile. Writing in your school and hometown are not necessary. If you include your full birthdate for everyone to see, you are leaving yourself wide open to identity theft.

Facebook does not take you through the privacy settings step by step, and the majority of the settings default to letting everyone see your information. I think you should be very aware when doing the privacy settings to opt, instead, to only let friends into the profile.

**Q: Can parents prevent cyberbullying of their child?**

**A:** No. We can't eliminate bullying but we can prevent it from gaining speed. I recommend parents every once in awhile use Facebook's search feature to look up their child's name. It's common on Facebook for pages, such as "I hate Jimmy Jones," to be set up. A parent can report the page to Facebook. Our research shows that they'll take it down in 20 to 48 hours. Even if Jimmy isn't your child, you can report the page. There shouldn't be hate pages on Facebook.

Beyond Facebook, you can create a Google Alert with your child's name. Anytime your child's name appears on the internet you'll get an email.

We advise parents not to get involved with the bully on a public platform. We've seen adults' comments add fuel to the fire.

**Q: How do you ensure your child isn't the bully?**

**A:** Walk your child through the etiquette, vulnerabilities and dangers of Facebook. Before they write anything, they should ask themselves two questions: Would they be proud to look at that comment a year from now? And would this comment be okay on the front page of a newspaper?

**Q: How can you monitor your child's reputation online?**

**A:** It's back to the conversation that they are ultimately responsible for what they write, and what Facebook groups and pages they join. There's also the search feature we mentioned.

**Q: Can you guard against your child befriending a predator?**

**A:** For 13-year-olds, you might allow them to be on Facebook on the condition they only befriend people they actually know. Secondly, you can lock down their profiles so that they cannot be added as a friend to someone else's list. That would discourage a predator.

With older kids, it's harder. They try to out-cool each other by having more friends. You need to talk to them about the risks of friending someone they don't know.

**Q: Dare I ask about posting photos and videos?**

**A:** Teens post risqué pictures that then become part of their digital footprint. If their privacy setting is open, everyone can see them. You can customize the privacy setting to make the photos visible to only a list of people you create.

**Q: Don't you have to be on your child's friend list to monitor? Won't kids just "unfriend" you?**

**A:** You have a conversation with them at 13 that you need a Facebook-friend relationship with them if they join the site. Respect goes both ways: You promise to never embarrass them by writing on their walls. But it's important for you to see what they're writing so you can guide them.

If a child "unfriends" you, there's nothing you can do about it on Facebook.

**Q: Your children are young, a 5-year-old and one almost 9. What age would you let them join?**

**A:** It's a maturity level. My eldest is very aware of the fun and the risks. I'd probably let her at 13. I'd be firm about the privacy settings and things to stay away from. I'd open the profile with her to make sure she stays under the radar.

Visit [FBGuideForParents.com](http://FBGuideForParents.com) for information about the e-book with tutorial videos, or the hard copy book with DVDs.