

What is Social Networking?

You may have heard your teenagers throwing around words like MySpace, Facebook, Xanga, Hi5, or Youtube. You may hear them talking about updating their “profile” or “friending” someone. You may see them wanting to update their “pics” or their “blog.” We hope this document will help you understand what the world of social networking is all about.

What’s a Social Network? – This is not just an Internet term. A social network is simply an informal, loosely-connected group of people. A church, a community group, or a school’s PTA can all be examples of social networks.

What’s a Social Networking Website? – This is a web page on the Internet that helps people start and maintain social networks. People start by creating a “*profile*” through these networking web pages. Then they can use the web site to find other people who also have their own profiles.

What’s a “*profile*”? – An online profile contains personal information that they feel comfortable sharing with others. A person’s profile might contain their name, a brief description of the things that are important to that person, a list of hobbies, educational background, movies they like, books they are reading, bands they enjoy, and practically anything else that person wants to share with others. Usually a profile also features one picture that the person wants to display (like a photo in a yearbook). This featured picture is technically called an “avatar” (but teens may rarely use this word).

Why do people start using social networking sites? – A Person may decide to create a profile online for a variety of reasons. They may want to try reconnecting with alumni from their high school or college. They may be curious because they have a number of good friends that already use social networking. They may simply want their own little “piece of the Internet,” a place to express their ideas creatively, write articles, publish their artwork, or speak about the things that interest them.

After someone has an online profile, what’s next? – Usually social networking sites have ways for you to search by name for people who may have personal profiles on that web site. After you locate someone you know, you “friend” them. You locate a button on their page that says “request as friend” or “add to friends.” That person will then receive a notice on their page that you have requested them to be a friend. If they accept the invitation, that person will appear in your list of friends and you will appear in their list. As you amass more friends, you can then go to those friends’ web pages and look at their lists of friends (who are people you may know as well). This enables people to rapidly grow their friend lists.

Do you “friend” people you don’t know? – You can do this, and many people do. Social networking sites are also designed for people to find others they do not know who may share common interests, such as causes they believe in, intellectual interests, religious affiliations, business ideas, or similar tastes in entertainment. Teens should exercise caution in this. Befriending someone gives permission to that person to view the information in your profile. It is recommended that teens only friend the people with whom they are acquainted.

What social networking sites are out there? – Currently there are over 50 social networking sites that have over 1 million active users, and some have tens of millions. Some are for the general population (sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Hi5, and Bebo). Some sites are geared towards specific ethnic groups (such as BlackPlanet and MiGente). Some are specifically for establishing business connections (such as LinkedIn). Some sites are geared towards reunions with old friends (such as Reunion.com and Classmates.com). Some are specifically for “blogging” (such as Xanga, Twitter, and LiveJournal). Some are exclusively for “vlogging” (sites like Youtube).

You mentioned “blogging” and “vlogging.” What are these? – “Blog” is short for “weblog” (web log). Blogs are essentially online diaries where people can write whatever they want about whatever they want. When you go to someone’s blog, the content is usually posted with the most recent writing first (the material is posted in reverse-chronological order). While businesses have started creating corporate blogs, blogging is primarily done by individuals who want to express themselves through personal journal entries and articles. A “vlog” is short for “video blog.” This means the primary mode of expression is video clips, not writing.