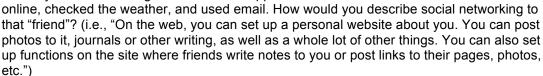# Spanning the Technology Gap

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Learn about Social Networking from the Experts—Teenagers

By Erika Allen, J.D., Ph.D.
Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs

It can be challenging to attempt to span the technology gap that sometimes exists between young people and the adults who care about them. In this article, I'd like to suggest that savvy parents and other caring adults have to truly endeavor to understand social networking—and who is the best person to help you learn what you need to know? A kid!

Read on for a list of questions to discuss with a young person that just might do both of you a world of good. You'll even find some sample answers to get children thinking or to fill in any gaps. But let the child do most of the talking and the teaching, as they are the expert here.

What is social networking? Ask your son or daughter or student to imagine that you have a friend from another country where Internet use and access is more limited. Your friend—okay, this is really you—has only done three things on the web: shopped online, checked the weather, and used email. How would you describe social networking to that "friend"? (i.e., "On the web, you can set up a personal website about you. You can post photos to it, journals or other writing, as well as a whole lot of other things. You can also set up functions on the site where friends write notes to you or post links to their pages, photos, etc.")

Who are the major players in the social networking world? Expect to hear about any or all of the main sites.

How are the things you do within social networking like things an adult (friend or family member) would do in the real world? (e.g., share photo albums with friends and family, write an annual Christmas card, email, etc.)

How is social networking like things an adult did when he or she was your age?(e.g., Pass notes, decorate notebooks with sayings and photos, talk on the phone, flirt at the mall)

How is it like things an adult does online now? (i.e., "social networking sites look like, in some ways, other sites; communication operates somewhat like email"

What are all the other words for "social networking"? (e.g., my online profile, my wall, blogging)

So how do you do it? (i.e., something like: "Easy: There are lots of companies that will

provide you a website for free. You go through a basic registration process and then choose the options and features you want for your site, including the look and the feel. You share the site with the friends and family you want to see it or to communicate with using the site. Regularly, then—even daily—you can update the site with writing or more photos as well as chat with friends, see things they are posting, etc.")

How could an adult use it? (e.g., share photos or to communicate what is going on in the family life with out-of-state loved ones; join a special interest community relevant to job or a hobby.)

*Why do you have an online profile? (i.e.,*something like"It is fun to express myself, who I am, online. I enjoy the creativity of "creating myself on line—enjoy it the same way I enjoy picking out my clothes or decorating my room. I am trying out who I really am, and this is another version of that. Beyond that, it is the way I stay in touch with my friends and also meet new people who are interested in the same things I am.")

Can you be specific about one thing that you did via your social network that you are proud of? (e.g., working through a problem in writing, finding a community around a cause or interest, or something like "Sometimes my friends and I can talk about things online that would be harder in person. If my friend has a crisis, I can know about it right away and be there.")

What are the risks of social networking? (e.g., people can be really mean online—especially because there are ways to be mean anonymously; kids sometime pretend to be other kids or even a grown-up can pretend to be someone they aren't; download a virus or spyware or something.)

Tell me about the worst thing that has happened to a friend (or you) on your social network. (e.g., bullying, stalking, etc.)

What traits of character are important to be a good person online? (e.g., kindness, modesty, and restraint)

Show me how to access your page and then show me three specific features you like the most. (Note: I have listed this question last, as it is the question that requires the most trust. Hopefully, earlier discussions have built some of this. That said, parents should insist access to their kids' sites and know how to access them independently.)

How wonderful to give a young person you know the chance to teach you about something as important nowadays as social networking. Not only will you learn from a true expert, but the exercise provides the opportunity for you to demonstrate your respect for your child's online life—and you create an opportunity to begin discussing the role of character in the