Friends are everything to a teen. Social networking sites (SNS) provide a way for teens to expand and enhance their connection to those friends. SNS have become a way of life for teens. As with many aspects of teen life, this is an area where parents need to gather more information and monitor what their teen does.

What are social networking sites?

SNS such as Facebook have wide appeal for teens, with the number of users growing daily. These websites combine many Internet features into one: the ability to post personal profiles, blogs, photos and videos, plus the latest news about music groups or hot new products, opinion polls, user groups, and more. The 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project says 73 percent of online teens have a SNS personal profile. Adult use is growing as well; 59 percent of online adults use SNS.

The most popular feature that SNS provide is the personal profile. Most teens consider very carefully what information they put into their profile. For example; how will their choice of music or movies be perceived and what kind of online image do they wish to convey? Although most teens become online friends only with people they know in real life, some teens may create a totally different image and personality through the use of a SNS profile connecting to an entirely different group of online friends.

In addition to SNS popular with teens, such as Facebook, Myspace or Bebo, there are hundreds of others that appeal to specific groups or are used in other parts of the world.

Issues for parents and teens

SNS have potential for negative consequences and are cause for the following concerns.

- Safety should be first and foremost. In a number of cases, sexual predators have been able to identify and locate children and teens through personal information they posted.
- Information teens think would only be of interest to their friends can get in the hands of others and produce unintended negative results. For example, a discussion about a teacher could include unfounded accusations.
- Employers might screen out job candidates who posted damaging information SNS as teens.
- Hackers may gain access to private computer files or do other mischief, such as alter a profile, after seeing inappropriate information posted on SNS.

Why are teens attracted to SNS?

For some parents, the big question is why would teens put all of that personal information on the Internet? It may help parents if they can understand the appeal that SNS and other new media have for teens.

Consider the world in which today's teens have grown up. The personal lives of well known people from entertainment, sports, and political circles are very public. Traditional celebrities live out their lives in the limelight, and other "ordinary" people become celebrities through TV reality shows – many of which are popular with teens. Teens can get closer to celebrities by following them on Twitter or friending them on SNS.

The importance of friends was mentioned earlier. As today's teens grow up, they view the Internet as a place to "hang out," even in real time via cell phones. Today's teens are a self-publicizing generation, with the Internet providing a way to share social status quickly and efficiently. Using the Internet to connect to friends they know in person and then make new friends online is a natural step – another way to communicate.

Figuring out their identity is a normal developmental task for teens. For example, it is typical for teens to try on different identities based on pop culture. Developing an online profile can be a way to try on an identity, test an image, and get feedback from others.

Advice for parents

Parents and caregivers need to know more about SNS. The best way to learn is to set up your own profile. Most SNS have an age limit of 13 before teens are allowed to create their own profiles. When your teen does create a personal profile, make sure you are on the same SNS so you can monitor his or her activities. More tips include:

- Learn what your teen is doing on the Internet besides posting on SNS. One way is to ask when you need help with an online task.
- Advise teens about what is appropriate to put on the web. They may have more web knowledge, but you have more life experience.
- Be clear about what is unsafe to post: full name, address, specific places they go, phone numbers, ethnic background, vacation plans, or anything else that would help someone identify or locate them.
- Remind teens that strangers and people they don't want accessing their information may have the ability to do just that. **Once something is posted on the web, it is no longer private.**
- Work with your teen to choose appropriate privacy settings for their SNS.
- Stress that the rules of SNS must be followed, including age limits.
- Help your teen find balance in life. "Screen time" includes not only computer, video games, and TV, but also cell phone time.

Communication via Internet technology is a good thing

The digital world is here to stay. Teens are growing up with and making Internet technologies, such as SNS, an integral part of their lives. There are many positive things about being able to instantly connect with friends through the multiple features offered by SNS. Building a personal profile can be a creative outlet for a teen. Frequent entries into an online blog can give teens practice in writing and expressing their thoughts and opinions.

Use of SNS is one way for teens to figure out the rules of social interaction, especially if they go beyond minute by minute updates of their social world. SNS might also lead them to:

- Connect to others with common interests.
- Learn more about their own and others' specialized interests.
- Explore different aspects of technology and use them more intensively.

The Digital Youth Project funded through The MacArthur Foundation says that "contrary to adult perceptions, while hanging out online, youth are picking up basic social and technological skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society."

The Digital Youth Project goes on to say, "If parents can trust that their own values are being transmitted through their ongoing communication with their children, then new media practices can be sites of shared focus rather than anxiety and tension."

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Teens and the Internet: Teen Talk Fact Sheet – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/families/families-with-teens/fact-sheets/teen-talk-teens-and-internet.pdf

Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings – The Digital Youth Project
http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu

Parents & Guardians: NetSmartz Workshop – National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
www.netsmartz.org/parents/

Social Networking: Internet & American Life Project – Pew Research Center
www.pewinternet.org/topics/social-networking.aspx

Web Wise Kids
www.webwisekids.org