

Out of Line Online

By Jennifer Magid

How much sharing is too much?

You've probably heard horror stories of teens being bullied on the Internet. Perhaps you've read about thieves that steal money, and even people's identities, using the Web. Maybe some of those things have happened to people you know.

Most of the time, information that kids and teens post on the Internet doesn't put them in dangerous situations. But that doesn't mean it won't cause embarrassment or damage to friendships. What you post online now may even come back to haunt you years from now.

Shep T., a 14-year-old from Maryland, spends a lot of time on Facebook. But Shep is careful about what he posts. "I don't mind if my friends post pictures of me," Shep says. "I just don't like to put stuff on Facebook that is too personal."

What does it mean to get "too personal" online? How can you know whether you've said too much?

From Small Secrets to Serious Situations

It's no secret that many kids and teens love instant-messaging programs and social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. More than half of 12- and 13-year-olds with Internet access in the United States used one of those sites in 2009. That's according to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, which studies how people use the Internet and other kinds of media.

All the commenting and posting kids do can sometimes lead to trouble. "What you share is able to be spread to many, many people in a very short period of time," warns Brian O'Connor, spokesperson for the Family Violence Prevention Fund. The group sponsors Thatsnotcool.com, a site that helps kids deal with tricky online situations. It has e-cards you can send to friends when you think they've shared inappropriate things online.

Even if nobody calls you out about a post, what's said online can cause problems that things said face-to-face can't, O'Connor notes. For starters, what you say online is more long lasting than words that are spoken in

person. Although you may have deleted something, it could have been printed out or passed along to someone else. And on some sites, once something is posted, you can't take it back.

Rachel K., 13, of California, has seen what can happen from saying too much online. In one case, a friend got in trouble for comments he made about another friend's photo. The discussion got printed out and shared with parents. Another time, one of Rachel's friends posted something online about a boy another friend liked. The other friend was not happy that the news was out. "Everyone could see it. She was shocked and mad," Rachel says.

Before you post something online about someone else, O'Connor says, ask yourself whether you would want it said about you. "Sleep on it. You might feel differently in the morning," he says.

It can also be hard to get your real meaning across through the written word. Have you ever said something aloud as a joke that would be hard to understand without a laugh, a shrug, or a roll of the eyes? That may be a clue that those words wouldn't work online. That's something Rachel learned firsthand. Last year, she had a big argument with a friend because of a text message that was misunderstood.

To Share, or Not to Share?

Miley Cyrus said she stopped using Twitter when she started feeling she was too exposed. But you don't have to be a celebrity to feel that way sometimes. And in some cases, putting too much online might do more than just make you uncomfortable.

Right now, it may not feel like a big deal if the world (including friends and strangers) knows what you are doing all day. It might not bother you that anyone can find you online (or, if you're using an application that uses GPS to broadcast your whereabouts, how to find you in person!). But your parents, your teachers, and even your future employers may be able to see things that you post now.

"Being irresponsible with your personal information can damage your relationships and even your future opportunity to be admitted to college," warns Vanessa Domine, an associate professor at Montclair State University in New Jersey. What you are OK with people seeing now may not be OK in a month, a year, or even 10 years.

So what's the best way to know whether you're getting out of line online? In most cases, it's simple. "Think before you type," says O'Connor.

Punished For Postings

Some schools have suspended or expelled students for things they posted online—even outside of school hours. Recent court cases have said that schools can punish students if material they put online creates a great disruption at school.



Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

That also goes for hurtful words. But in those cases, teens could even be charged with crimes. "You can be held responsible for somebody else hurting themselves because of rumors or because of information spread online," says Brian O'Connor. He's a spokesperson for the Family Violence Prevention Fund, which teaches people ways to stop violence and hurtful behavior.

That's Not Cool?

There are many ways to let your friends (or former friends) know the way they're using their computers or cell phones is not cool. Here are some of the reasons people send the "callout cards" on Thatsnotcool.com

- texting a boyfriend or girlfriend all the time, to keep track of him or her,
- breaking into another person's e-mail account,
- posting lies or insults online,
- spreading hurtful rumors online or through text messages,
- giving out another person's phone number without his or her permission.

Is Age Just a Number?

Most social networking sites don't allow people younger than 13 to sign up. But many kids join before then, either with their parents' permission or without it.

Shep T., 14, first joined a social networking site so that he could stay in touch with his friends from summer camp during the year. "I have not tried to join any other networking sites, but I know people that have tried to and couldn't because of their age," he says.

Rachel K. joined a site with her parents' permission when she was 12 by saying she was already 13. Her mom told *Current Health*, that trust played a big role. "We made an agreement that we could always check her Facebook page and that she couldn't defriend us. I do trust her and feel that she uses it to keep in touch with friends she doesn't see often," she says. But if parents don't know their child is online, or if the kid didn't ask permission before joining, Rachel's mom says that's a different story.

Don't worry—not getting to socialize online definitely isn't the end of the world. "My best friend isn't allowed to have a Facebook [profile]," Rachel says. "But since her older brothers have one, she will get one eventually."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. As you think about your future, why do you need to be careful now about what you post online about yourself?
- A You will most likely regret putting anything about yourself on the internet.
 - B The internet is like a permanent archive that stores everything that is posted online.
 - C Inappropriate personal information may make it hard to find a job or get into college.
 - D Your friends may still hold a grudge against you or post inappropriate pictures of you.
2. According to the passage which of the following is not a problem that causes people to send "callout cards"?
- A breaking into another person's email account
 - B stealing someone's identity
 - C posting lies or insults
 - D spreading hurtful rumors online or through text messages
3. The spokesperson for the Family Violence Prevention Fund most likely
- A posts inappropriate comments online all of the time
 - B shares his friends' secrets on Facebook
 - C is very cautious about what information he posts online
 - D encourages friends to post whatever they want online
4. Read the following sentence: "Miley Cyrus said she stopped using Twitter when she started feeling she was too exposed."

In this sentence the word **exposed** means

- A annoyed
 - B challenging
 - C out in the open
 - D without help
5. The main point of this passage is to
- A argue for tighter internet controls for kids and teenagers so that youth cannot get into trouble online
 - B explain the multiple problems with social networking sites for kids and teens and brainstorm some ways to prevent these problems
 - C urge colleges and future employers to examine the internet for background information on a candidate
 - D teach kids and teens how to use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to socialize with friends

6. What is one solution listed in the passage to help prevent you from posting something unkind or inappropriate online?

7. Rachel K's friend got into trouble for comments he made about another friend's picture. Do you think those comments were complimentary or insulting? Use evidence in the passage to support your response.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Recent court cases have defended the school's right to punish students _____ they post information online that causes a disturbance at school.

- A if
- B before
- C so
- D but

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Students can be punished if they create a disturbance at school by posting inappropriate information online.

Who? students

What? _____

Why? _____

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: admitted (at · mit · ted): be accepted into an organization, business, school or recreational place (like an amusement park).

10a. Read the sentences below and underline the word **admitted**.

1. After paying ten dollars each for tickets, the couple was admitted into Water World for a day of fun in the sun!
2. Because of Jillian’s outstanding academic track record and commitment to community service, she was admitted into Dartmouth College, one of the most selective colleges in the nation.
3. If you are 17 or older, you can be admitted into a rated-R movie.
4. In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first African-American woman to earn a college degree when she graduated from Oberlin College, after having fought to be admitted four years earlier.
5. Once the man began hearing voices that no one else could hear, he was admitted into a psychiatric center for medical treatment.

10b. Which picture most likely represents an object you would need to be admitted to a movie?



11. Why would the 19-year-old college student not be admitted into the bar?
