



# Calming Parental Anxiety While Empowering Our Digital Youth

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## Introduction

Kids are growing up in a digital world. They connect, share, learn, explore, and play in way unimaginable just a generation ago. This is the only world they know and their parents, teachers, political leaders and even the media are all doing what they can to catch up. The emergence of social media, in all its extraordinary forms, is pushing the boundaries of what we think of as private while giving us all, and our children, a platform to express ourselves anytime, anywhere.

It can be an unnerving prospect to a parent or teacher to see their kids pack so much processing power in their pockets. The media have played on these fears with screaming headlines and nightly news leads about cases of online predators, pornography, cyberbullying and sexting. Some lawmakers have proposed online safety legislation based on a single event, such as a suicide that had an online component to it. At least one state attorney general suggested raising the age limit for kids accessing social media to 16 years.

While understandable, these reactions are not always helpful or healthy. The promotion of fear, uncertainty, and doubt may make for provocative headlines, but it does little to create an informed and empowered young citizenry, prepared to take on the challenges of the future. The power of social media and new technology has transformed the notion of citizenship, the pro-social set of behaviors that enable people to be connected to the world around them.

And with these new powers comes new responsibilities. Parents and educators must be prepared to guide their kids in this new digital world. Policy makers must help advance the right ideas that help keep kids safe. And, ultimately, teens must be equipped to make smart, safe and responsible choices online in order to reap the many opportunities presented in the digital world.

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### **Indeed, everyone has a stake.**

In this document, FOSI – the Family Online Safety Institute – seeks to add a reasoned and research-focused voice to the conversation about families and technology. In Part One, we will identify some of the most common myths that are fostering parental anxiety about technology and will identify the latest research to dispel those myths. In Part Two, we will articulate principles that will help families to make the right choices for themselves. In Part Three we call on every stakeholder in this conversation to play an active role.

We hope this paper helps frame the conversation about the realities of social media and technology for families. And, as a conversation takes more than one voice, we hope to hear your thoughts. Join the conversation at [www.aplatformforgood.org](http://www.aplatformforgood.org)



## Part One: Myths vs. Realities

There are risks and challenges associated with the things that our children do every day. From crossing the street to jumping off the high dive to riding a bike, we continually measure the risks and rewards of the things that we allow our children to do. We do not ban these activities from our children's lives. Nor, do we consistently focus on the negative consequences of these activities.

We focus on the positive and teach our children the life skills to look both ways when crossing, to swim and tread water and to use a brake effectively, as well as the requirement to always wear a helmet. The vast majority of the time, we educate our children on the best ways they can stay safe while participating in these activities.

Unfortunately, when it comes to social media, too often the focus is inverted. That is, the conversation is often focused on the negative and, even more troubling, is also misguided because the negative risks we are focusing on are based on myths, misconceptions and not on research.

Let's explore these myths and then highlight the realities of social media in the lives of young people.

**What's remarkable is that despite the shocking headlines, few are talking about the stories of how technology unites communities to create a culture of responsibility online.**

### **Myth: Bullying is running rampant in social media.**

#### **Reality**

- Face-to-face bullying is far more common than cyberbullying among youth. 18% of students said they had been verbally bullied and about 5% said they had been bullied online. 80-90% of youth bullied online were also bullied verbally or physically in-person. ([Olweus, 2012](#))
- 93% of European children responded that they had never been bullied online ([UK Council for Child Internet Safety 2011](#))

#### **Consider this:**

- Kevin Curwick, a high school senior and football captain started a [campaign](#) on Twitter to discourage bullying. It's called "Osseo Nice Things" and Kevin uses it to Tweet positive notes about his classmates and do what he calls "#niceitforward".

- Middle school student, Julia Bluhm was tired of hearing her friends criticize their own bodies so she started an online [petition](#) to protest photoshopping in Seventeen Magazine. Thanks to her, the magazine publically vowed to not digitally alter their models anymore!
- Born This Way Foundation (BTWF): BTWF is a youth-led initiative that leverages social media to affect change in home, schools and communities, with a singular focus creating “a new culture of kindness, bravery, acceptance and empowerment.”

## **Myth: Teens don’t understand privacy. They self-reveal before they become self-aware.**

The issue of teens and privacy vexes parents a great deal. They worry that their kids will become prey to predators or that their identity will be stolen or that sharing too much will adversely impact their future. And yet, recent research by TRUSTe paints a somewhat different picture.

### **Reality**

Many have posited that teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviors online and place little importance on protecting their privacy. Yet, the statistics tell a different story. According to a [2012 TRUSTe study](#), 64 percent of teens use privacy controls on social networks. In addition, TRUSTe also found that 78 percent of teens feel in control of their personal information on social network sites, a number nearly identical to their parents.

But, it isn’t enough to gauge teen’s privacy behaviors by merely self-polling teens. How about their parents? Are they confident that their children understand the best ways to protect their identities and other personal information on line? TRUSTe found that 84 percent of parents are confident their teen is responsible with personal information on a social networking site.

## **MYTH: Social media makes kids feel isolated and depressed.**

### **Reality**

Despite data to the contrary, many still believe that social media makes kids feel depressed and isolated. But, the findings from groups such as the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that the reality of social media for our children is much different than the Internet fables we all hear.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project [recently found](#) that 78 percent of teens reported positive personal outcomes from social networking interactions. In addition, the study also noted that 65 percent of social media-using teens have had an experience on a social network site that made them feel good about themselves and 58 percent have felt closer to another person because of an experience on a social network site.

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Recent findings from another recent [study](#) of teens social media use and attitudes included :

- 83 percent of teens have visited a social networking site
- 29 percent of teens say that social networking sites make them feel less shy

- 28 percent said that social media makes them more outgoing and 20 percent said social media made them feel more confident.
- 19 percent said social media made them more sympathetic to others
- Only 5 percent said that social networking makes them feel more depressed

Let's not let some of the negative hype preclude us from providing social media opportunities for our kids. Let's just be frank with ourselves and our children and develop online environments that both protect younger kids but are not so limiting that they stifle all the benefits of social media.

We need to ensure that our children are fully aware of how to safely navigate the Internet and social media. However, we need to avoid the fear-mongering of social media and the perpetuation of myths that are solely focused on raising alarm.

There is ample evidence that the Internet, in general, and social media, specifically, provides our children with opportunities to learn, interact, participate and connect with the world to make a difference like they never had before.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [outlined](#) the five major benefits of children and adolescents using social media:

1. Opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events, including political and philanthropic events.
2. Enhancement of individual and collective creativity through development and sharing of artistic and musical endeavors.
3. Growth of ideas from the creation of blogs, podcasts, videos and gaming sites.
4. Expansion of one's online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds (such communication is an important step for all adolescents and affords the opportunity for respect tolerance, and increased discourse about personal and global issues.
5. Fostering of one's individual identity and unique social skills.

A Harris interactive [survey](#) of teens earlier this year backs up the AAP's presumption. The survey found that 68 percent of teens feel that the benefits of social media outweigh the risks, especially when people are coming together to promote a positive social change. In addition, more than half of teens say social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have made them more aware of the needs of others.

Dr. Michael Rich, a pediatrician and the director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital in Boston, recently [said](#), "We should not view social media as either positive or negative, but as essentially neutral. It's what we do with the tools that decide how they affect us and those around us." Indeed, much like we can control both positive and negative aspects of automobiles by observing the speed limit, employing intellect and caution and collaboratively working with drivers, social media requires its own behaviors, commonly referred to as digital citizenship

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## Part Two: Social Media Best Practices

Industry, policy makers and other stakeholders need to ensure that some simple ideas and best practices are applied to social networking services that cater to children. Employing the key safety principles outlined below will help to change a deeply damaging cultural attitude that makes technology something to fear. Our children cannot be fully insulated from the outside world. Legislation cannot be the primary vehicle for safeguarding our children from society. Of course, we need to provide them with a toolkit of protections, but we also have to provide them with ways to identify, judge and react to a wide range of situations.

- 1. Build Media Literacy Skills.** Kids, teachers and parents need effective digital literacy skills training to become confident digital citizens, not insulated from the world of content, but aware of the different types out there so they can safely navigate and interpret them. Roads may be unsafe places at times. But we wouldn't think of preventing kids from going out to visit the library, for instance. Children must be guided and then trusted to safely navigate our digital world as well.
- 2. A Focus on Good.** Social networks need to provide children with an environment that straddles the fine balance of providing safeguards, while also offering the freedom to take advantage of the many benefits of children using social media as outlined above.
- 3. Family Accounts.** For the youngest of online users, we need a dynamic that doesn't encourage kids to lie about their age and, in some cases, cause their parents to help them break the rules. Researcher danah boyd [found](#) that 93 percent of parents believe that they should be the ones to decide whether or not a child can access Web sites and online service . These wishes should be respected.



## Part Three: A Shared Responsibility for All

So let's not give into the myths, but focus instead on the positives and benefits of our evolving digital lives. Our next generation of entrepreneurs, philanthropists and cultural leaders will have the Internet and social media as part of their DNA. We need to work together to provide our children with a strong foundation of life skills that will enable them to convert their digital citizenship to a means of doing "good" across their entire life.

### All of us have a role:

**Policy Makers:** Provide a regulatory environment that ensures protections for our children without stifling the type of innovation that will lead to more jobs and better lives for us all. Provide the resources for teachers and parents to obtain the necessary online skills to keep up with their children.

**Parents:** Engage with your children and take an active role in their off-line and online lives. Foster conversations with your kids and don't overreact when they show you something that has upset or disturbed them. They are looking for help and guidance. Stay calm and give them clear and reasonable boundaries and then ask them to show you around their online lives.

**Teachers:** Continually build your cyber skills and offer your students the ability to enhance your classroom lessons by leveraging the benefits of social media .

**Industry:** Make simple, easy to use tools, resources and privacy policies to help parents protect their children and work in coordination with policy makers to provide online environments that are safe, secure and beneficial to youth.

**Child Safety Organizations:** Serve as a "voice of reason" that brings policy makers and industry together to solve real problems, help allay anxiety and better serve our communities.

**And, finally....Kids:** This is your world. It's up to you to be responsible for your actions – for photos you post, comments you make and bad stuff you report. It's your time to take up your rights and responsibilities as a digital citizen. And teach your parents well! Help them understand how you use the web and show them all the great places and online spaces you use and bring them with you. That will ease their concerns and, ultimately, give you more freedom to explore and express yourself online as well as in the "real" world.