

## Wally's Club, Wally's Play Groups & Social Skills Seattle

In my work coaching children to help them build the complex set of social/emotional skills they need to navigate family dynamics, friendships, and peer relationships at school and on teams, I frequently am asked by parents about the benefits and risks of children's use of social media.

Age-appropriate social media and the online world when monitored by parents present abundant opportunities for kids to experience pro-social and intellectual growth. At the same time, risks and pitfalls exist that each parent should help their child learn to identify and avoid.

The following article by Joy Das Gupta, a marketing director at Starbucks and mother, explores social media issues that you and your children likely will encounter. It provides a starting point for your online education and links to some of the many important resources available to parents. Because the online world is ever changing with new social media platforms, parents should periodically familiarize themselves with the latest online offerings, lingo, and parental controls.

Sincerely,  
Karrin Grutz

### Navigating Social Media With Your Kids

Author: Joy Das Gupta

#### **Introduction**

Before we dive in, let's acknowledge that there are a lot of resources, recommendations and warnings out there about kids and social media. If you're like me, it can easily be overwhelming. My goal is to help you focus on what you need to consider to develop a plan for your family.

When it comes to safe and effective social media use, our most important job as parents will be to **model the behavior** we want our kids to follow and **have consistent family rules & conversations**.

#### **A Little Background on Social Media**

**Why is social media such a critical part of today's social skills development for our kids? Can we just opt out?**

If you already participate on social media platforms, you'll understand how it heavily influences the ways we receive news, communicate with family and friends, declare our relationships and track our hobbies. Especially critical is how social media redefines what it means to be a "friend". Digital friendships can be different from in-person friendships and the communication norms between each are different as well. For many kids (and adults), navigating the differences is not intuitive. Social media relationships are here to stay and can benefit from our participation and coaching.

Even if your family chooses to prohibit or delay the use social media, it is highly likely they will be exposed to some type of social media network through their friends during playdates, on the school bus, at camp etc. No matter what rules work for your family, it's inevitable that social media will be a topic of conversation at home.

### **What are the key social media platforms that my child will use?**

This depends on their age and friends. Many tweens and teens are eschewing Facebook, one of the mostly widely used networks, because their parents are on it! Tweens and teens will always be searching for the next cool thing, so beyond Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat, there will always be new networks springing up and gaining attention.

For a recent view of social networks used by teens, it's worth checking out this article from [The Atlantic](#). It has a summary of common networks and a helpful chart to visualize their impact. In addition to Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, the article reminds readers that other popular services like texting, You Tube and Pandora have to be considered as "social networks" as well.

### **How to learn more about social networks?**

If you're not feeling well-schooled on these networks, it's worth the investment of time to orient yourself.

1. Open an account for yourself before allowing your child to join any new network (this includes gaming networks with social functions). Pay special attention to privacy and security options
2. Seek feedback from trusted family or friends that already use the network. They are a great source of the pitfalls and benefits.
3. Read parent reviews. A great place to start is [Common Sense Media](#), an independent non-profit organization with age-based and educational ratings and reviews.

### **Managing Risk: Setting up Your Family Digital Rules**

Before embarking on social media with your kids, your family will need to

1. Establish your family rules
2. Sign a Digital Contract agreeing to the rules
3. Post the rules in a visible place and regularly monitor

### **Where should I start in setting up our Family Rules?**

To get you started, I've distilled the most common rules & recommendations.

## Safety/Privacy Rules

At a minimum, each family should establish their boundaries & rules for safety.

- **Personal Information:** Kids personal information should not be shared, including address, telephone number, name of school or even when you're going on vacation. These same rules apply for parents' work address and telephone number, which should not be shared without parents' permission.
- **Meeting Strangers:** Kids agree that they will never get together with someone they "meet" online without first checking with their parents. If parents agree to the meeting, it will be in public place with a parent present.
- **Passwords:** Passwords should not be given out to anyone, other than parents. (This means not even best friends!) You may decide that you will require passwords to access your kids accounts.
- **Downloads:** No downloading or installing software or doing anything that could possibly hurt your computer or mobile device or jeopardize family privacy.
- **Posting Photos:** Kids will request permission to post pictures of themselves or others online and agree not to post any pictures that our family considers to be inappropriate. (This may lead to a necessary conversation on sexting. Common Sense Media has [resources and links](#) to help parents with this topic)

## Health Rules

Because too much time on a screen can interfere with physical fitness, social relationships & sleep, your family rules should include a statement on:

- **Amount of Screen Time**
  - How many minutes of screen time per day or per week? Include language on what rules apply on weekends, vacation & summer
  - When is screen time allowed? Is it allowed at anytime during the day? Or only after chores? After homework?
  - What time should screens must be turned off for the day? (typical recommendation is 2 hours before bedtime so it doesn't interfere with sleep)
- **Locations**
  - Where can devices be used in the house? Experts recommend using screens in a public area of the house where it can be monitored. Bedroom use is not encouraged, nor should screens be used during family meals.
  - Are there any other locations where you also want screen limits, such as restaurants, grandma's house, in the car etc?

## Content Rules

Ok, this is a big one! While safety and health rules may be straight-forward, content choices can be nuanced. Parents will have to make decisions on what is and isn't appropriate for your family and how you will teach good digital citizenship. Your child will be both a *content creator* through posts, photos and video and a *content consumer* by following other people's information as well as seeing digital advertising.

- **Guidelines for Content Creation**

- Reinforce your safety rules for posting personal content of any kind
- Explain that content does **not** disappear and **cannot** be assured that it will stay private. Teach kids to post as if someone else will see their content – be it parents, teachers, college admission officers or other kids. To illustrate, there are many cautionary articles & videos on teens who have had content exposed that they thought was private. Choose one that you think is a good discussion starter for your family.
- State your expectations for digital etiquette & citizenship and the consequences if your expectations are not met. This is the time to discuss:
  - o **Positive Talk & Tone:** If you wouldn't say something directly to person, you don't post it online. And no one should ever pressure you to share anything you don't want to.
  - o **Quality Posts over Quantity:** Increasingly there are articles about how teen egos can rise and fall with the number of digital friends they have, how many "likes" their content receives and other type of validations. Parents will want to stay attuned to any concerns about your child's self-image or self-confidence when using social media.
  - o **Cyberbullying and How to Recognize the Signs:** This is a topic that is frequently highlighted in the media and requires thoughtful, intention conversations with your kids. Helpful parent resources and tip sheets can be found at [StopBullying.Gov](http://StopBullying.Gov) and [Cyberbullying.org](http://Cyberbullying.org)
  - o **In-person and Digital Communication Are Different:** Parents intuitively understand digital messages and emojis do not always convey the same intent and emotion as a live conversation. Our kids may not. It's a great time to brainstorm examples of how and when you might use each type of communication with friends, family and teachers.
  - o **Monitoring.** State what access you will have to their account and what you will monitor.

### Content Viewing

- **Choosing Content:** Talk about how to choose content to view and follow. Carve out a quiet and fun time to sit with your child as they open their account, set up privacy and security settings and explore content for the first time. If relevant, use your own accounts as examples of how you filter content, choose who to follow and how you screen out ads. Whenever possible, you should be one of your kids "friends" on their networks.
- **Help Kids Recognize Advertising:** Ads can look like "real" content and it's worth a conversation on if, when & how to respond. And without giving out personal information.
- **Acknowledge that Some People Post Inappropriate Content:** This can be content from people you don't know or even your friends – in either case, it's not ok and you are ready and available to talk about it. If this happens, many family digital contracts include a pledge that kids agree to tell their parents if they see anything uncomfortable.
- **Familiarize Yourself with Law Enforcement Recommendations for Parental Oversight.** While not all conversations with children regarding social media require a discussion of online predators, many law enforcement

agencies and advocacy groups offer practical safety advice for parents and kids. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has a wealth of information available through its website (<http://www.missingkids.org/publications/ProtectingYourKidsOnline>) including the NetSmartz program referenced below.

### **Can I Just Block Objectionable Content?**

Partially yes. There are many ways to block and filter content. Some families deploy controls through their home network; others leverage safety and privacy settings of their operating system or chosen software. Alternatively you may choose to ban the use of certain apps or sites completely. For example, you may say Instagram is ok, but Snapchat is not. By limiting screen use to public areas of the house, this will also decrease inappropriate use. It's also vital to spend time investigating the privacy and safety settings of any and every social network that your child uses to utilize the protections offered.

That said, while you can lock down your own devices and home network, you can't control what our kids see from someone else. It only takes a minute on a school bus or afterschool to view a quick video or screenshot from another kid. Therefore, you should always be ready for conversations about digital content and citizenship.

### **Setting up a Family Digital Contract**

Here are a couple of templates that you can tailor for your family and have different versions, depending on your child's age

[SafeKids Family Contract](#)  
[NetSmartz Pledge](#)

But for something less like a list and more personal, here's a savvy mom's iPhone agreement with her son that is both informative and entertaining, titled an "[iPhone Contract for my Second Son, With Love](#)". (I'm guessing she learned a few things along the way with her first son...)

A couple words about family contracts and pledges

1. **Emphasis on the "family."** These templates are for kids, but as parents, it's essential that we model the behavior we want and set aside *our* screens when we eat, before we go to sleep and during other critical family activities. You may want to have a parent pledge as well.
2. **Reinforcing that as parents, we are here for support.** It's great that many contract templates include statements to emphasize that we are here for our kids, such as: "I will tell my parents right away if I come across something that makes me feel uncomfortable." [Janell Burley Hoffman's contract](#) uses wit & humanity when she tells her son: "*You won't always get it right. You will stumble and lose your way. I get it. Dad gets it. We don't have to like it. But we can handle it. You are surrounded and loved and held up by the most beautifully*

*imperfect people. On the Internet and in life: You are never alone. We've got you."*

These aren't guarantees that your kid will talk, but it can send the message that you're available when they want to talk and you want them to have a good experience.

## **Having FUN and Building Supportive Social Communities with Your Kids**

Now that we've already covered how to create family rules to manage risk, let's not forget about the wonderful ways you can celebrate and share the many benefits of social media with your children. Your own healthy use of social media can be a great behavior model and can be a fun and enriching way to connect with your kid. Here are a few examples:

- **Connecting others with similar interests.** If your child has a specific hobby or sport or other favorite activity, social media can offer a terrific way to enrich that interest by finding content and connecting with others. You can also incorporate social media into spending quality time together. Examples:
  - Build a [Pinterest](#) board together. Many interests lend themselves really well to starting a Pinterest board, like photography, food, art, party planning or other crafts.
  - Follow some favorite [Instagram](#) users together. Choose a respected athlete, photographer or other person you like.
  - Discover and watch a [YouTube](#) channel together (that you've already vetted for content). This can be a way to track videos on elite athlete and musicians and follow their training and competitions. It can also be used extensively for engaging academic content.
  - Find books that you both enjoy on [Goodreads](#), a social network for book lovers. Read book reviews, build book lists, write book reviews and more.
- **Maintaining family connections.** Whether your family is near or far, social media can help reinforce and maintain family connections through sharing photos and videos of special moments and milestones, planning family reunions and sharing interests. Using social media with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins can be an excellent way to begin social media usage and citizenship.
- **Supporting others in need through philanthropy and education.** Remember the [Ice Bucket challenge](#)? This was a 2014 viral social media contest that raised over \$100M for ALS (Lou Gehrig's) disease and patient support. You can pick any topic important to your family and follow it together on social media – hunger, health, environmental issues. These can be great opportunities to demonstrate how social media can be used for good, by quickly amplifying an important cause to raise awareness and/or funds.
- **Supporting creative self-expression.** For many people, social media offers an opportunity to create beautiful and inspiring stories, photos and videos. This may offer an opportunity for your child to develop communication skills through blogging, journalism, photography or video arts. By creating their own content, you can

reinforce again what the rules are for appropriate content and reinforce that digital content is never truly erased.

The idea here is to explore social media together for the pleasure of building and expanding your community and interests. It's a springboard to discuss and reinforce appropriate content and comments.

## CONCLUSION

At their best, social networks expand our interests, knowledge and communities. At their worst, social networks can create a mob mentality, where without proper guidelines people can feel bullied and belittled.

Our most important work is to **model the behavior** we want our kids to follow and **have frequent conversations** on safe and effective social media use.

## Additional Resources

Of course, there are a million websites and articles on this topic, but I'm going to just list TWO that I highly recommend that you check out and follow on social media.

1. [Common Sense Media](#): Common Sense is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology. They have age-based reviews and ratings on all types of technology, family guides and a whole host of other useful resources – don't miss out on this resource.
2. [Netsmartz.org](#): This is one of the most comprehensive resources on the topic of Internet Safety. Netsmartz is an interactive, educational program of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children that provides age-appropriate resources to help teach children how to be safer on- and offline. I also recommend checking out their teen site which has comics, videos and quizzes to provide an engaging way to discuss this topic, which is [www.nsteens.org](http://www.nsteens.org).

And one extra site, [Birds and Bees and Kids](#): If you need a resource on how to talk to your kids about sexuality (or if you've been uncomfortable or dreading the topic), check out this site from Seattle sex educator, Amy Lang. She has recommended books by age, offers webinars for parents and does speaking engagements at schools and other venues.

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About the Author: Joy Das Gupta is a mom and marketing director at Starbucks, where social media is used every day to build authentic brand connections with our customers and partners.