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***Simple Tips  
for Helping  
Students  
Become Safer,  
Smarter Social  
Media Users***

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As anyone who works with today's teens knows, many teenagers spend hours each day interacting on social media. And as anyone who follows the popular media also knows, adults can be quick to condemn teens for sharing personal information online. Sadly, few of these discussions about popular media are based on accurate understandings of teens' behaviors with social media, and even fewer take into account teens' ideas of online privacy and safety.

With the goal of understanding teens' perspectives, we undertook a study of high school students' online privacy and safety opinions and behaviors. Funded by a 2014 ALISE/OCLC Library and Information Science Research Grant, we worked with ninety-eight senior-year students in two U.S. high schools. Forty-six young women and fifty-two young men were in the participating group. All ninety-eight students completed questionnaires about their digital device ownership, Internet/Web access, and social media use. The students also took part in hour-long focus group interviews.

Based on the survey responses, we learned that this was a highly connected group of students with

high social media participation. Ninety-three percent owned a laptop or desktop computer, as compared to the U.S. teen average of 80 percent computer ownership (Pew 2014). Our students also had higher than average cell phone ownership, at 98 percent compared to the national teen average of 78 percent. Their social media use was closer to the national average of 81 percent, with 87 percent of the students in our study using social media at least once a week.

In thinking about teens and online risks, school librarians need to know researchers generally agree that, despite the popular image of pedophiles and criminals lurking online waiting to harm innocent young people, in reality social media use is only about as risky as most everyday social interactions in the offline world (Agosto and Abbas 2013). Based on our research and guided by suggestions from the teens themselves, we have created two sets of guidelines for helping school librarians, teachers, and other concerned adults teach students how to become safer social media users. The first set of guidelines is called "Best Practices for Teaching Teens to Become Safer, Smarter Social Media Users." It presents eight educational strategies that school

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librarians, classroom teachers, and other educators can use to increase the effectiveness of online safety education. In the second set of guidelines, "10 Simple Tips for Safer Social Media Use," we offer easy recommendations for teens themselves to follow online. Visit <https://onlineprivacysafetyteens.wordpress.com> to learn more about this project and for online versions of these guidelines that you can share via social media with teachers, librarians, parents, and teens, and print to display in your library.

### **Best Practices for Teaching Teens to Become Safer, Smarter Social Media Users**

Based on our research with teens across the U.S., we recommend the following guidelines for improving the quality of formal and informal online safety education in libraries and schools.

#### *1. Teach Teens about Risk-Benefit Analysis*



Social media use can provide teens with a range of social, emotional, and cognitive benefits, but the

popular media often characterize Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc., as places where young people engage in a wide range of unsafe activities. In reality, the risks of social media use are about equal to the risks of most offline public activities, such as going to the mall. Adults should teach teens to become thoughtful,

reflective social media users and to consider the possible benefits and harms of their actions before posting anything online. Instead of dismissing the entire social media world as frivolous and dangerous, providing teens with a balanced view shows them that you respect their desire to interact online and that you trust in their ability to become responsible users.

#### *2. Build on Strong Adult-Teen Relationships*



Teens respond best to lessons and advice from adults they trust, especially when dealing with

sensitive issues such as online privacy and safety. This is especially important in larger libraries and schools, where technology specialists might have strong knowledge of best practices, but they might not have trusted relationships with all of the teens they serve. Adults who lack these trusted relationships can work together with teen librarians, homeroom teachers, and others who work with the target audiences on a daily basis to coteach online safety lessons.

#### *3. Offer Hands-On Lab Sessions and Live Demonstrations*



In our work in several high schools across the country, students have told us that online safety curricula are often delivered in the form of stock

videos about the potential harms of the Internet. They say they would find hands-on, interactive online sessions a more engaging, more compelling, and more effective way to learn. Even teens with considerable online experience and several existing social media accounts have much to learn about selecting privacy and safety settings, guidelines for intelligent information sharing and reuse, and more.

#### *4. Avoid Scare Tactics; Frame Lessons in Positive Terms*



Students also dislike the negative terms in which school curricula often frame social media

use, suggesting that all social media use is dangerous, or that nearly any social media use can be construed as cyberbullying. Students tend to react negatively to scare tactics and threats and to perceive negative framing as school administrators' efforts to protect themselves from lawsuits and other possible negative ramifications of students' risky behaviors. Framing lessons in positive terms sends the message of genuine concern for teens' well-being and sincere interest in teaching them to become better-educated users.

#### *5. Use Personal Stories/Testimonials*



Students we have worked with also tell us that personal testimonials, especially

stories from fellow students or trusted adults who have had risky encounters online, are much more effective in teaching them about the potential dangers of careless online behaviors than lessons

delivered via videos, lectures, or other less personal means. Schools and libraries can poll staff members to find volunteers to tell their personal stories or look to teens themselves for meaningful stories to share.

## 6. Take Advantage of Teachable Moments/Incidents



Just as personal connections make lessons more meaningful and have a stronger impact on teens,

taking advantage of teachable moments and incidents as they occur in real time also impresses upon teens the real-life implications of online safety. For example, at one school where we conducted research a student had been caught hosting a social media account for posting cruel comments about other students. Rather than using the incident as a springboard for school-wide discussions about the appropriate use of social media and the effects of posting negative comments about others online, the school expelled the student and barred the student body from discussing the incident in school, losing out on a potentially valuable teaching opportunity, as well as an opportunity to promote community healing.

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## 7. Be a Social Media Role Model



Students we worked with reported that their parents or teachers did not know how

to “properly use” social media, oftentimes not following the best practices of each social media site. They also complained that schools restricted *their* use of social media, yet some teachers had circumvented the restrictions by creating their own sites for homework help or for posting class assignments and schedules. Teens can be confused by the mixed messages this practice is sending. Parents and teachers should review the best practices of the social media sites being used by teens and work with librarians to develop ways to integrate social media into positive learning experiences. In addition, parents, teachers, and

librarians should routinely work with school administrators to review current online use agreements to determine if there are ways to permit student use of social media in positive educational contexts.

## 8. Favor Education over Restriction



Lastly, banning teens entirely from social media might seem like a way to keep them from experiencing risk,

but doing so deprives them from participating in an important part of youth culture, and many teens will still find ways to use social media. It is much more beneficial and realistic to teach teens best practices and to help them to become educated, intelligent social media users, preparing them to be successful digital citizens now and throughout their future lives.

## 10 Simple Tips for Safer Social Media Use

While social media use is safe for the most part, it comes with an element of risk, as does almost any form of human interaction—online or offline. School librarians can teach teens the following ten simple tips for increasing their online privacy and safety.

### 1. Limit Information Sharing via Privacy Settings



Not only are many teens unaware that they can change the privacy and security settings on their social

media accounts, few read the available options in full. Careful reading and selection of the strictest acceptable settings is one of the easiest ways to limit your personal information sharing. In addition to careful initial selection, periodic review of your account settings is important, as available options change frequently. (However, even the strictest privacy settings can't provide complete protection, and responsible use is still necessary.) Note that privacy settings vary from site to site, making it important to read and periodically review the policies and options for each different site.

### 2. Withhold Optional Personal Information



Many sites ask for your real name, phone number, physical address, and other personal information, but

they do not require it in order to use their services. When possible, refrain from providing any optional personal or other identifying information to protect your privacy as much as possible and to limit the

amount of personal information that service providers can collect about you.

### 3. Use Pseudonyms or Alternate Required Personal Information



In addition to withholding optional information,

using pseudonyms or alternate information is another method of limiting your personal information online. When personal information such as their real name is required to create an account, many teens use pseudonyms such as nicknames, middle names, or made up names to keep their identities private. Only friends who know their pseudonyms can find them online and access their personal content. When a phone number is required, many teens use their house landline numbers instead of providing personal cell numbers.

### 4. Limit Online Friends/Fans



Although it can be tempting to gather hundreds or even thousands of followers, the risk of someone

capturing and misusing your personal information increases as the size of your audience increases. Policies such as limiting your friends to people you know in the offline world or limiting your friends to friends of people you know in the offline world, can help keep the size of your social media account audiences reasonable.

### 5. Think of the General Public as Your Audience



Social media environments might feel as if they are intimate, but

sharing in social media is never truly private, even if you limit the audiences that can see what you post. A good way to avoid over-sharing personal information is to think of the general public—not just the person or people you are aiming your messages at—as your audience. If you wouldn't feel comfortable saying something to a group of strangers or sharing a photo or video in public, then you shouldn't do it on social media.

### 6. Consider the Possible Consequences before Posting Information Online



It might seem funny today to post a picture of yourself in your underwear or acting wild at

a party, but before posting these kinds of pictures or any other personal information online, ask yourself, "Is this something I want people to be able to see in five years? In ten years? Is this something I want potential colleges or employers to see?" As a rule, if you hesitate or feel unsure about sharing something, *don't do it*.

### 7. Remember that Anything You Post Will Stay Online Indefinitely



Even if you delete that embarrassing picture, post, or video, chances are it will stay online somewhere. It

might be saved by the social media service you posted it to, or captured by a search engine, or copied—without your knowledge—by one of your friends or followers. This means that before posting anything online, it's important to consider: "Do I want this to be available on the Internet for the rest of my life?"

## 8. Monitor Your Online Content



It's a good idea to periodically Google yourself and to review your account profiles to see what personal information

others can readily access about you. You might find that information you had thought you had limited is being widely shared, which might lead to changing your sharing practices.

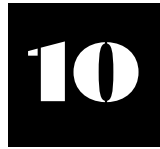
## 9. Change Passwords Frequently



You should change your passwords for your social media, online shopping, phone, and other networked accounts

every few months. It's also important to use different passwords for each. That way, if someone does obtain one of your passwords, the person will be able to access only the one account... not your entire online life.

## 10. Use Common Sense Online



Above all, use common sense. If posting something seems like it might be a bad idea, it probably is. If you feel uncomfortable in an

online environment, then leave. If you feel yourself hesitating before adding someone to your group of friends or followers, then don't do it. Simple common sense can be your best defense against possible negative consequences of social media use.

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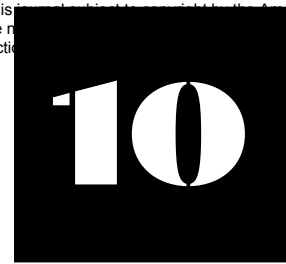


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issue of *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*. She also coauthored (with Kyungwon Koh) "Future of Library and Museum Services Supporting Teen Learning: Perceptions of Professionals in Learning Labs and Makerspaces," published online by the *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, and "Competencies for Information Professionals in Learning Labs and Makerspaces" in the spring 2015 issue of *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*.



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