



Online Photos

Teens love to connect with their friends, and the Internet is the easiest, most accessible place for them to share photos of themselves and each other. As a parent, you should have all the tools you need to know how they do it, and what they're sharing.

Online photos are uploaded to the Internet so that you can store, edit, or share them with other people. The most popular sites with teens are Facebook and MySpace, which they are already using everyday for social networking. Other sites include Photobucket, Flickr, Snapfish, Shutterfly, TinyPic, Windows Live Photo Gallery, and Picasa, just to name a few.

Common mistakes teens make when posting photos online include forgetting that these pictures are going to be out there for a long, long time, available for viewing online by, among others, a future sweetheart, a prospective college, or a potential employer. Sometimes people share pictures electronically without realizing how easily they can be distributed to many other people. You never know who has printed, cached, shared, posted, or copied your pictures.

It's not unusual for teens to hear stories about a private or funny, but embarrassing, photo that somehow ends up getting distributed all around their school. "Sexting," a huge issue now, occurs when teens take provocative pics of themselves with a cell phone, and then send them to boyfriends or girlfriends. Teens also take embarrassing pictures of others kids and use the images to harass them. The risks start when kids take pictures of things or people they are not supposed to take, and then start sharing them. Education is the best way to make things safer.

To Tag Or Not To Tag

"Tagging" pictures is a new way to identify a person in an online photo. When you're making an album online, many sites will give you the option to "tag" people who appear in the pictures. Tagging someone in a picture adds it to a database of images in which they appear. It's similar to adding a caption, but has more functions than just to describe a photo.

By clicking the "tag photo" button, you can place an invisible box around the person in the photo and label her or him. Anyone who views the photo and rolls a mouse over that person will see the photo subject's "tag," which is usually her or his name.

On social networking sites, your online profile can be accessed through tagged pics, if your profile is not set to private. Tagged photos are also linked to a database in your own profile. You can easily see where photos of you – that others have tagged – are stored. Users are notified with an e-mail or alert whenever they are tagged and can "untag" the images if they choose, removing them from their databases. Tagging pics allows other people to know when a picture of them is posted on the social networking site they are using, giving them the chance to untag it.

The unspoken rules about tagging a picture are that if a person looks really bad in a photo, if they're doing something they could get into trouble for, or ask not be tagged in it, then you don't tag her or him. If someone does untag a picture, you need to respect that person's wishes and keep it untagged. Sometimes a friend will ask you to remove an embarrassing picture entirely. When this happens, it's your responsibility as a friend (or family member!) to accommodate her or him.

Photo tagging can be a great way of organizing pictures by who is in them, making it easy to find and share photos with others.

When a Photo is Inappropriate

Sometimes it's painfully embarrassing to look at what other people put online and teens know what they do and don't want to see online, especially if it's of themselves! It's not that hard to rule out right from wrong when posting a photo.

First off—and this has more to do with basic safety than edgy images—does the photo show the names of any schools, sports teams, streets, or towns that indicate where a teen could be found on a regular basis? Basically, is there anything that can be used to get information about someone by just looking at the picture? Second, is it sexual looking – is there too much cleavage showing or are the short shorts too short? Lastly, is it a potential framed photo for a grandma's living room or a school yearbook?

If parents do come across an inappropriate picture of their teen, they should be a little protective, but also able to comfortably explain to their daughter (without tears or yelling) why some pictures are just inappropriate. Help her delete them and then offer to take some new pictures of her with her camera.

Since parents are normally the ones buying devices like cell phones, they can make sure they know more about what they're buying before they give it to their kids. Perhaps younger kids shouldn't have camera phones until they are experienced and mature enough to know how to use them properly. This is sometimes a hard call when older siblings regularly use these devices with little or no adult supervision. Nonetheless, it's still an option.

What Parents Need to Know Now

Cyber-expert Parry Aftab (pictured below) lays out the facts about what your girls are putting online.



Pose, snap, post! Taking, sharing and commenting on pictures and videos online is one of teens' favorite pastimes. They take them using their cell phones, Xbox 360, pocket video cameras, and Wi-Fi-capable digital cameras. They store them on their DS and PSP devices, computers, flash drives, media cards, and online services.

The good thing is that these pics let them share their creativity and lives with family and friends. The bad thing is that it lets them share their personal information, impulsivity, and sexuality with everyone online. Sexting (when young people share nude or sexual images of themselves and friends with others using text-messaging on cell phones) and sexing (when they use any digital technology, including cell phones to do this) is on the rise, and far more common than parents know.

Good teens, model students, and teen leaders are all likely candidates for "girls gone wild" online! They start at about age 13 and continue throughout their teens. The younger ones do it to look "mature" and audition for the older boys' attention. The older teens do it to show how much they "love" their boyfriend or to get even after a bad breakup, showing him how much he is "missing." They do it from a slumber party for fun, or take the pic of one of the girls they don't like in the bathroom, locker room, or dressing room to use as a weapon to hurt her. And boys do it too. Not as often as girls, but far too often.

And a picture is worth a thousand words! Even the more careful teens will share pictures or videos online that give away far too much personal information about themselves. Their houses may appear in the backgrounds, or their cars with license plates in plain view. Their Girl Scout uniform can give away their troop, which in turn gives away their location and activities. And even if they are careful about what they post, their friends may not be.

What's the takeaway? Sit down with girls and talk about their "pics." Look at their friends' pics, too, and follow your teen's tagged pics. (They will show you what that means.) Be interested, but don't be a snooper. You may have some fun, share in your teen's life, and help her be safer all at once! If you don't ask... she won't tell!