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Useful Tips for Parents: Should Your Child Have a Social Media Account?

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From Facebook to YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat, the options for social media networks on which children can stay connected and share their views are plentiful. Despite all the plus points which social media brings to our lives, there are also dangers which we should be wary of as they put the safety of our children at risk.

Trying to shield our children from the dangers of social media has proven to be challenging, as technology plays a key role in the way we live, work and play today. But how much should a child be exposed to social media, and at what age should they be allowed to open an account of their own?

What do the law and experts say?

According to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, it is illegal for commercial websites and apps to allow children below 13 to open an online account without verifiable parental consent.

"The law was created to keep companies from collecting data about kids and marketing to them," says Stephen Balkam, the founder and CEO of the non-profit Family Online Safety Institute.

However, most children are able to find their way around this rule by using a parent's email and a fake date of birth without consent. Apart from the legal implications involved, there are also concerns about whether or not children have the maturity to keep their online interactions under control.

"At ages 7 to 11, children are still thinking very concretely, and they haven't yet developed the ability to consider hypothetical situations," Dr Lisa Strohman, the founder and director of the Technology Wellness Center explains.

"So an 8-year-old girl posting a video about how to do her hair is just thinking, 'My friends will see this and it will be great!' She can't take that next step and think about who else might watch that video and write mean comments or even report it and use it to sell hair products."

While it is challenging to generalise the right age for children to start using social media, Dr Michael Rich, director of the Center on Media and Child Health at the Boston Children's Hospital states that parents are the best judge of whether their child is ready

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for social media usage.

“Some kids may be ready to handle social media under the legal age of 13, but most probably can’t,”

To help you narrow down your decision, Dr Rich suggests that parents ask themselves, “Can [my child] use it in ways that are healthy and respectful of others?”

Tips to keep your children safe while using social media

While you have decided to give your child consent to use social media, it might be a good idea to venture together at first and keep a close watch on your child as he/she finds his/her own way.

Here are some things you can do:

Be part of the crowd

It is important that you stay one step ahead of your child when it comes to social media. Dr Rich recommends that you join the site yourself (if you are not on it already) and get familiar with the safety issues and its potential uses. With this, you are able to advise your child on the features that he/she should avoid while using the app.

Gain full access of your child's account

Make sure that you have full access to your child's account by taking down details of his/her username and password. You should also follow him/her with your own account, so that you are updated on the things that he/she is posting and sharing.

Set the ground rules

To manage your child's usage of social media and devices, do lay down the rules from the start which specifies when and how he/she is allowed to use it and the consequences of breaking any of the rules.

It is also important that your child knows that he/she can talk to you about anything bad or peculiar that happens online. This can involve being bullied by another child or when a stranger tries to contact him/her or ask for personal information.

“It’s a conversation you have to begin before you give him the device or let him join the site, and you must keep the discussions going,” Balkam says.

There are security settings in your social media apps which could compromise your child's safety while using them. More details and the next steps to take on the next page.

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