

## Why we need to pay attention to our kids' social media

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Just when you think you have a handle on all the social media sites your child could possibly frequent, a new one crosses your radar.

Take Ask.fm, a social networking website that originated in Latvia and allows users to anonymously ask and answer questions of each other. (It's similar to the U.S. based Formspring, and was developed as a competitor to that site). Ask.fm is a website and app for iPhone and Android users. Users need only be 13 years old (or say they are 13) to sign up for an account. Once you sign up for an account, you can post any question/answer you want. Questions range from simple ("If you could drive any car, what would you drive) to sexually charged content.

The site has grown in popularity among teens in the past year, but more importantly it has garnered attention in the media because of cyberbullying issues related to posts by some of its users. The site has a lengthy disclaimer, which states in part, "The ask.fm service allows for anonymous content which ask.fm does not monitor. You agree to use the ask.fm service at your own risk and that ask.fm shall have no liability to you for content that you may find objectionable, obscene or in poor taste."

Ask.fm is being pressured for more accountability, and it appears as if the company is listening. In an open letter, the company said, "We are committed to ensuring that our site is a safe environment. We have implemented various measures over the past month to continue to improve our user safety." Among those measures is a button to report inappropriate content.

That being said, the site is still a mecca for cyberbullying. And the fact that it's a Latvian-based site means U.S. laws don't apply.

One of the problems with apps such as Ask.fm is that kids can be on it without you even realizing it. It's not like a text where you can check your cellphone bill to see who your kids are texting. View some of the content on Ask.fm and you'll realize just how scary it is to think of what your child can be exposed to without you even knowing.

There are three significant issues with this:

**Safety.** The anonymity factor takes "stranger danger" to a whole new level. Ask.fm does have a safety page that offers practical guidelines on how to be safe while using their service. User can also turn off anonymous questions. That being said, a user's profile and content is still public.

**Cyberbullying.** Anonymity also makes cyberbullying much easier.

**Inappropriate content.** There is a significant amount of sexual content on Ask.fm. Again, anonymity makes it easy to ask *anything*.

What can we do as parents?

- Open up a dialogue. Encourage your child to stay away from sites that promote

this kind of anonymous interaction. Remind children never to share personal information with someone they don't know, such as allowing a program to access their location, or any personal information that could potentially identify them (such as hometown). Remind them that just because someone sounds like a cool teenager doesn't mean they actually are.

- Talk to your children about cyberbullying. Discuss how anonymity can lead to bad behavior and cruel comments.
- Review social networking tips, and set guidelines for what's OK to post online and what's not. Be sure to check privacy settings on any website they sign on to, particularly for younger children.
- Review your child's apps and contacts on their cellphone. Don't recognize someone? Ask why they are on your child's phone. You have a right and an obligation to know what they are doing – particularly if you are paying for their cellphone!
- Remind your children to think before they post. Kindness counts. If they wouldn't say it to someone's face, don't say it online. The Dignity for All Students Act and related New York State laws make schools accountable for certain online student behavior – especially harassment, discrimination and bullying – even when it occurs off campus and outside of school hours. A child's inappropriate cyber activity could have severe consequences for his or her academic career if it creates a significant disruption within the school.
- Be aware of history. Check the computer's browser history for information on sites your child is visiting. There is no mechanism to prevent a child from saying they are over the age of 13 when they are not. They are savvy enough to figure out how to compute an age that makes them old enough to set up an account.
- Get with the program. Check out the various websites that are out there. Get an account for yourself and see what your children can and can't do online.
- Check the settings on your computer to ensure as much as possible that your child doesn't have access to inappropriate content. Make sure parental controls are set on the computer your child uses, or they could get an education you're not planning on.

The organization Common Sense Media can help you learn more about sites your child might visit. Common Sense Media is a non-profit organization that advocates on child and family issues and studies the effects that media and technology have on young users. The group reviews books, movies, TV shows, video games, apps, music and websites and rates them in terms of age-appropriate educational content, messages/role models, violence, sex, profanity and more. (Check out the [First Time Here?](#) link at Common Sense Media to learn more about the site.)

### Another warning

Another site to be aware of is KIK.com, which offers group texting. It touts itself as "the fast, simple, and personal smartphone messenger that connects you to everyone you love to talk to." Problem is, you can talk to anyone, even strangers. Sign up for an account and you can access a plug-in called Oink Text, which opens up users to strangers. At the push of a button, users can start chatting with people they may or may not know. It's a frightening concept.

For more information read [What Parents Need to Know About KIK Messenger App](#)

**ADDITIONAL READING:**

[Facts about Ask.fm](#) from ChicagoNow.com

From ABC News: [A look at the risks kids face on popular social media sites](#)