Safety first in shifting social media scene

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Police in the upstate New York town of Gloversville last week arrested a man who they say harassed and made threats to a high school girl through the social media site Snapchat. The man allegedly sent indecent photos of himself to the girl and threatened to "go Columbine" — a reference to the 1999 mass shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School — on Gloversville High School if she did not reciprocate, police told**Fox23News**.

Thankfully, the Gloversville girl reported the incident to police, who were able to track down and arrest the man at his home.

The story reminds us that we need to be vigilant about discussing social media safety with our children. With so many social media sites at our children's fingertips, it can be difficult to monitor every one. Yet, it's important to familiarize ourselves with what's out there.

Take Snapchat, for example. Snapchat is a smartphone/tablet app that allows you to send pictures or short videos to friends. When you send a video or photo, you decide how long it will last — from one to 10 seconds — before it self-destructs. Because of its temporary nature, teens can be under the impression that they can send photos only to the intended recipient. One concern is that Snapchat can be viewed as a "safe" sexting site.

But gone does not mean forgotten — or gone, for that matter. In the Gloversville case, police were able to track down the accused using the online data and arrest him at his home. "Contrary to what people believe, there is a retention period to any and all of this information," Gloversville Police Chief Donald VanDeusen told Fox23News.

There's also the "screen capture" feature on smartphones and tablets. A quick-thinking iPhone or Android user can capture a picture of the Snapchat photo received on the device, and then it's available to share anywhere.

So here's the message to our children: If you think a photo has self-destructed, think again. Its electronic footprint is **still out there**, and if what you're sending on social media isn't something you want me, Grandma or a potential employer to see, don't send it.

There's also a larger issue that comes into play with all photo-related social media. We tell our children not to share information about themselves with strangers. "Don't tell anyone where you live," we say. "Don't post your hometown on Facebook."

And yet, they often don't look behind them at the background of the photo, at things that could make them easy to identify: a team jersey displaying a high school name; an identifiable business or landmark; a caption that pinpoints a practice time.

There's also the discussion about who we allow to have access to our information and our lives. Snapchat users can take some steps to protect themselves from harassment. The Snapchat menu feature allows users to adjust their settings to allow only "my friends," instead of "everyone," to "send me snaps." That way, only the people whom

the user has added as friends can send the user pictures or videos. It's also possible to block former "friends" if a situation gets uncomfortable or a user is feeling harassed.

We can't talk with our children enough about social media safety. For more tips and information, check out **Connect Safely**.