

# A Positive Digital Footprint



What is a digital footprint? If your teenager uses the Internet, then he has one! His footprint is the trail he leaves online, including comments, photos, and chats. And his footprint is seen not only by friends and relatives, but also by potential employers and college admissions staff. Here are ways to help your teen project a positive image—and stay safe—when he's online.

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doesn't like, she could ask the site administrator or the person who posted it to remove it. (She can click on "About" or "Contact" to find the site owner.)

## List rules

Talk to your high schooler about how you expect him to behave online. For example, he shouldn't post inappropriate photos of himself or anyone else, and he shouldn't post personal information like his phone number or address. Together, make a list of rules and hang it by the computer or on the refrigerator to remind him about responsible and safe behavior. *Idea:* Consider having him sign a "usage contract" so you're both on the same page. Make your own, or find one at [fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/family-online-safety-contract](http://fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/family-online-safety-contract).

## Project a good image

What kind of impression does your high schooler want to make on people who view his accounts? Suggest that he cast himself in a positive light by posting polite reviews, retweeting good news, or congratulating a school sports team, for instance. On the other hand, he should avoid using bad language or making nasty comments. Let him know that bad grammar can hurt his digital footprint, too!



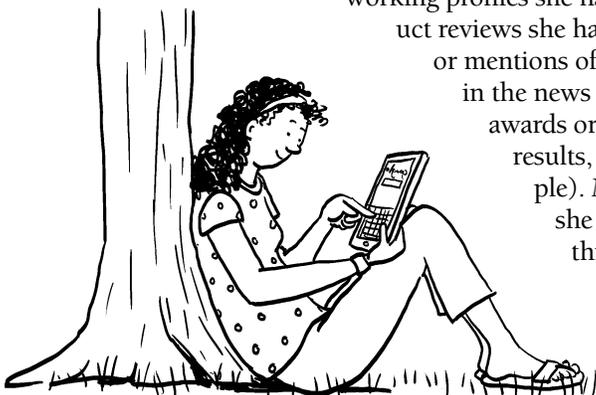
## Google yourself

To see what the world sees when searching her name online, encourage your teenager to type her name into Google or another search engine. She'll find links to any social net-

working profiles she has, product reviews she has posted, or mentions of her name in the news (for awards or sports results, for example). *Note:* If she sees anything she

## Choose passwords wisely

Tell your teen to pick passwords that are difficult for others to guess. Keeping them secret can prevent people from accessing her devices and accounts and potentially sending or posting negative messages or charging purchases in her name. A combination of numbers and upper- and lower-case letters is much safer than her pet's name or her favorite color—things that others would know about her. She should also vary passwords across accounts, change them at least every three months, and keep any record of them in a safe spot (say, her desk drawer). Explain that she shouldn't share them with anyone besides you, not even her closest friends. If someone does learn a password, she'll need to change it right away.



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**Online is forever**

In this age of social networking, texting, and hacking, anything your high schooler posts or sends electronically may never go away—even if she deletes it. Point out that once she posts a comment or a photo, she should assume it's out there forever. Remind her that someone could have taken a screenshot of her post before she deleted it, an older version of the website may be available, or a hacker might steal information and repost it.

**Monitor app updates**

Have your teenager disable “automatic updates” on phone or tablet apps. Each time an app is updated, privacy settings might change, making his personal information and photos suddenly public. Instead, he can wait for a notification that an update is available. Then, he should read its latest sharing policy and change settings so he controls what others see about him.

**Click carefully**

Encourage your teen to be choosy about what she clicks on. The wrong link or attachment can put unwanted software on her device. Some of these programs steal personal information or even send messages on a user's behalf. Mention that she'd feel pretty embarrassed if an email she didn't write went to everyone in her inbox. To help guard against this, she should

keep protective software (anti-virus programs, adware removers) up to date and not click on pop-up or banner ads.

**Steer clear of cyberbullying**

Remind your high schooler that his real-life values (responsibility, kindness, respect) apply online and that you expect him not to participate in cyberbullying. That means thinking carefully about the text messages he sends and the comments he posts on social networks. Also, let him know what to do if he is bullied—he should tell you right away and block the sender. Depending on the post, you may need to contact the school or even the police.

**Say no to online dating**

More and more teenagers are using websites to find dates. Explain to your child that there's no way to know if people are really who they say they are. Besides, as she learns to form relationships, there's no substitute for getting to know someone face-to-face before deciding to date. When you set dating rules for her, include a rule against meeting someone in person whom she first met online.

**Watch out for identity theft**

Since teens are starting with a clean credit history, identity theft can go unnoticed for a long time—maybe even until your child applies for his first loan or credit card. Suggest that he check his bank account frequently for any unusual activity. Also, he could get a free credit report yearly from each of the three major credit bureaus (see *annualcreditreport.com*). *Note:* If someone has used his personal information to apply for or open an account, have him contact the bank or firm.



**Spend time “IRL”**

Limiting the amount of time your child spends using her phone or surfing the Internet will give her more time to interact with people in real life. Experts recommend no more than two hours of screen time per day for teenagers (not including homework).



Encourage her to balance screen time with real-life activities like hanging out with friends, playing sports, participating in extracurricular activities, or doing community service.

**High School Years**