

Be a Good Digital Citizen

Your middle grader probably started learning about good citizenship in kindergarten—but what makes a good digital citizen? Actually, many of the same real-life rules apply to the digital world. This guide contains advice that can help your tween make positive choices, be well informed, and interact with fellow online citizens in safe, respectful ways.



Create a positive digital footprint

Every time your middle schooler goes online, she leaves a digital footprint, or a trail of her activity. It includes her comments, photos, and videos, all of which paint a vivid picture of who she is. Her footprint is easily accessible to friends, relatives, teachers, and coaches—and eventually to colleges and employers. Help her create a positive image with these ideas.

Think before you post. Ask your tween what kind of digital footprint she wants. Point out that she's in control—this may encourage her to make smart decisions. Before she posts a comment or photo, she should consider whether it will help or harm her reputation. Retweeting a picture of a lost pet, for example, is positive because it shows she cares about animals and their owners. *Tip:* If she's ever hesitant about posting something, have her ask herself, "Would I want the principal or my grandparents to see this?" If the answer is no, she shouldn't post it.



Treat others with respect

Good character matters online *and* offline. Your child should treat others the way he'd like to be treated by being respectful. A good rule of thumb? If he wouldn't say something to someone's face, he shouldn't say it online.

It's also important for your middle grader to respect others' opinions online, even if he doesn't agree with them. Often, the most respectful response to a post he disagrees with is no response at all. That's because online debates can sometimes become hateful and escalate to personal attacks.

Note: Talk to your tween about cyberbullying, or using technology to bully others. This includes spreading rumors, making threats, or encouraging others to harm themselves. If he sees posts that fall into this category, or if he is targeted, he should tell an adult right away.



Be a detective. To show your tween what a digital footprint looks like, play detective using a celebrity as a case study. Let her pick an actor, a musician, or an athlete, then hop on a social media site and scroll through that person's photos and comments. What is your child's impression of the celebrity? Which posts helped her form her opinion? Then, encourage her to Google her own full name as well as any screen names she uses. Is she proud of what she sees?

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Evaluate online information

A good citizen is well informed. When it comes to digital citizenship, that includes figuring out whether information is accurate and credible before using it or sharing it with others. Here are tips to help your middle schooler read critically.



Distinguish between fact and opinion. When your tween reads an article, encourage him to look for language like “It seems to me that...” or “That’s probably a good thing...” These are clues that the author is expressing an opinion rather than reporting straight facts. Also, an opinion piece will often be labeled “opinion” or include a disclaimer from the owner of the website.

Rely on multiple sources. Suggest that your middle grader read stories about the same topic on at least two news websites. How are they similar and different? One may include details that the other leaves out, or they might quote different people. He’ll discover that it’s best to read more than one source to get the full picture.

Know the author. When your child does research for school assignments, he should use sources written by experts. For example, sites created by government agencies (ending in .gov) and schools and universities (ending in .edu) tend to be more trustworthy than those made by private individuals or companies.

Determine the purpose. A site that’s trying to sell a product may be biased. Say your tween is researching energy drinks for a report. He can probably trust a health agency’s website over that of the company that makes the drinks.

Note: If your child isn’t sure whether a source is credible, he could ask a teacher or librarian for help.

Protect privacy

Obeying a few important privacy rules can keep your tween safe online. Share these guidelines with her.

Stick with people you know. Create a rule that your child can interact online only with family members and friends she knows in real life. Let her know that this rule applies to everything, including social media sites, apps used for chatting, and online gaming.

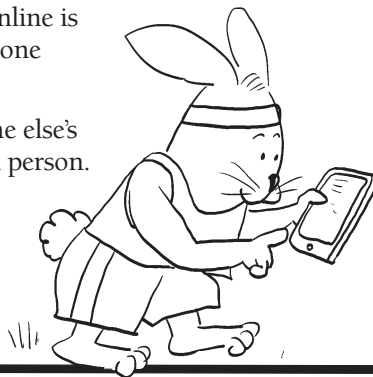
Use privacy settings. Help your middle grader adjust settings on any sites and electronic devices she uses. Doing this will prevent strangers from seeing her posts or contacting her.

Keep passwords private. Explain to your child that she should never tell anyone her passwords—not even close friends. Anyone who knows her password could log in and post as her.



Five tips for being a good digital citizen

1. Consider the fact that anything you post online is there forever. Even if you delete a post, someone may have already copied and shared it.
2. Avoid plagiarism. When you share someone else’s words, photos, or artwork, give credit to that person.
3. Refrain from swearing or using any language that could be offensive to others. Also, make a good impression by checking for correct spelling and grammar before you post.



4. Obey the law. Don’t download movies, music, or games from sites that share them illegally. Instead, use only streaming sites and cable services that your family subscribes to. It’s also illegal to hack into others’ social media accounts and websites.
5. A healthy dose of skepticism comes in handy online. If you read something that seems really far-fetched or just “off,” there’s a good chance it’s not true—and you shouldn’t share it.

Middle Years