

## Safer Social Networking for Children

Social Networking Sites have received a lot of press over the last few years, both positive and negative. Sites like Facebook, Myspace and Bebo are extremely popular with both children and adults with over 800 million users on Facebook alone! They allow users to keep contact with current friends, find old school chums and even meet new people. However there has been a lot of negative press regarding social networks due to several high profile cases involving inappropriate contact and concerns over the amount of personal information available to other users.

Nearly all social networks also enforce a minimum age limit, requiring users to be over the age of 13. This is not always practical to enforce as it is very easy to lie about your age online. This means that many children have access to a world of people but with limited understanding of the risks they may be taking.



There are Social Networks available specifically for children, designed to ensure that they are as safe as they can be in a digital environment but still teaching them appropriate behaviours for future use.

Child Friendly social networks include:

- Bin Weevils
- Neopets
- Club Penguin
- Moshi Monsters

There are many safety features they employ, some of which are listed below:

- Chat filters - This stop anyone using the site sending someone their mobile phone number or email addresses. Some sites also employ people to moderate public posts to ensure that only appropriate messages are displayed.
- Safer chatting - Sites like Club Penguin have an option where users can only send pre approved messages, selected from a list.
- No advertising - The large majority of children's social networking sites do not have any adverts (although some do employ product placements!). This stops children clicking on adverts and being taken to potentially inappropriate websites.
- Moderators and Secret Agents - Some sites will employ people to keep an eye on children who may send inappropriate messages. Many will also ban users automatically if they send an offensive message to someone. They also encourage the users to report abuse and even give them a special status on the site. Moshi Monsters has a red M which users can click to report abuse or bullying

Many of these features are very helpful in creating a safer environment where users are limited in what information they can share about themselves. By doing so this allows them to learn how to interact with people from all over the world and preparing them for the more popular social networks later in life.

For more information on these alternatives to Facebook, just type the site names into Google and have a look. If your children already use these sites, why not get them to show you how it works?

