

The whole point of social networking sites and blogs, even photo sharing sites, is that they let you share information with others. This is great for a whole range of purposes, but it also means that you must take responsibility for the information that you place on any site and for the precautions you take to make sure that any confidential information is secure.

Two sites with lots of good advice are

- **Get Safe Online**, www.getsafeonline.org
- **Information Commissioner's Office**, www.ico.gov.uk.

Any social networking site should have their own guidance on securing your personal data.

This handout summarises the key points.

1. Check the website's privacy policy

Before you sign up to a website, you should read carefully the terms and conditions and the privacy policy. There should be a link to these clearly displayed on the home page of the website.

If there is no such link, don't use that website!

The terms and conditions or privacy policy should state clearly what may be done with any personal information that you provide to set up your account. The privacy policy should state how you can control access to any data that you post to the website to share with others. If you are not happy with the terms, then you should not use the website.

2. Make sure that the site uses proper security

When you set up or edit your account on a website, or when you enter credit card details to pay for any goods or services on a website, e.g. to buy prints on a photo sharing site, or to subscribe to additional services that are not free, the website should establish a secure server connection.

You will know that you have a secure connection because the website address will start **https://**, and a small padlock will be displayed.

It will be next to the address if you use Internet Explorer 8, or at the bottom right corner of the page in Firefox.



If there is no secure server connection, do not enter any confidential data.

3. Use a strong password

It is particularly important on a social networking site to use a password that cannot be easily guessed. Never base your password on information that is visible in your profile.

See **Choose a Good Password**.

4. Understand how to use the site

Before you start to put any information on a social networking site, make sure that you know how to restrict access to those people who you want to see it. This should be clearly explained in the site's help pages and privacy policy.

5. Think twice about what you make public

If you are setting up a profile on Facebook or any other website, which will only be seen by people that you know and trust, then you can share information freely with them.

But don't post your home address, telephone number, date of birth or the names or photographs of any children where they can be viewed by people that you have not specifically authorised.

6. Use a separate email account for contact

If you are providing a contact email address that can be seen by anyone, set up one using a web email service such as Gmail that you use only for this purpose. Then if you do start getting spam or messages from people you don't want to hear from, you can just cancel the email address.

7. Don't embarrass yourself or others

There are many stories of young people, and adults as well, who have said things in their profile or blog, or posted pictures or videos online, that subsequently come back to haunt them.

Before you put anything on the web, ask yourself 'What will people think?' and only do it if you can say 'I don't care!'.

8. Be wary of people that you meet online

It is essential to be very careful when contacting people that you have met through a website. This applies particularly to people that you have not met before, but someone you knew many years ago may also be very different. There is lots of advice directed to young people on avoiding risks to personal safety from online contacts, but it applies to older people as well.

You should also be careful about opening any file sent to you by someone that you don't know, and about following hyperlinks suggested by someone who you know only via a website.

9. Report inappropriate activity

If you do experience anything that alarms you or affects your enjoyment of using a social networking site, report it to the website operator. The privacy policy will tell you how to do this.

10. Don't be put off by this advice!

As you read this handout, you might think 'That's not for me!'

Please think again. Millions of people use social networking sites and get a lot out of it. These simple precautions mean that you can be one of them.