Setting Up Your Child's Facebook Profile
(from Kim Komando)

Facebook was originally intended for college students. Until recently, only college students could register and create profiles. But today it's open to anyone in high school, or older. It has a growing population of high school students and adults.

Facebook has worked hard to protect children. Predators will have a much harder time there than on MySpace. But some will probably slip through, somehow. As parents, you MUST be involved. Keep the computer where you can watch it. You still need to know what your teens are doing.

Facebook functions differently

MySpace and Facebook are very different. MySpace is completely open. Anyone can jump on the site and search profiles. Facebook is less accessible. Users must register to view anything. Registration and access is limited by rigid requirements. Facebook is built around networks. When people sign up for Facebook, they identify with a network. Networks are specific colleges, high schools, companies or geographic regions. Users can join up to five networks. They can then browse profiles in their network. They can also access their friends' profiles. But they can't look at profiles in other networks.

When users choose a network, they must prove that they belong there. (Geographic region networks are an exception.) To join a college network, users need a school-provided email account. That's something like "whatever@harvard.edu." A confirmation email is sent to that address. They must confirm through that email to be added to the network. A false email address will not work.

Restrictions on company networks are similar to those for colleges.

This email validation system creates more privacy for everyone. It's much harder to create a fake account. And predators and criminals can't easily troll through everyone's profiles.

More validation for children

Facebook has additional security for younger users. Anyone under 18 must register with a high school or college network. Children can't create a profile without being accepted by a network.

Age is determined during registration. Children must enter their birthdays when signing up. That is the only way Facebook calculates age. They could lie and claim they're older. That will eventually catch up to them. For instance, 13-year-old children could advance their ages two years. That could put them in high school. But they'll be kicked out when their false ages reach 19.

A school network must be the first network that children 13 to 18 join. It has to be chosen during the initial Facebook registration. Users with existing non-high school accounts cannot join high school networks. These networks are for current students only. High school networks also use email validation. If possible, children must use a school-provided email address. This rule is actually optional. Some high schools do not provide email addresses for students. So this validation isn't required. But again, Facebook doesn't let just anyone on a high school network.

Children can attempt to join a high school network without a school email address. But they are considered unaffiliated until people in the network accept them as friends. It may take more than one acceptance to be validated this way. An unaffiliated high school user must be validated within 60 days. If not, the user will no longer be able to use Facebook. It seems like a lot of hoops to jump through. But it helps keep predators and criminals out of children's profiles. Joining a high school network adds security to a child's account.

Profile information

Facebook's networks give children's accounts a good bit of privacy. But they still need to be careful about their profile. Putting up too much personal information is still dangerous. Parents should work with their children to set up a safe profile.

The first step is to choose a profile picture. Click Profile at the top of the page. Then click "Upload a profile

picture." This will be the main photo on the profile. It will also show up in Facebook searches. For children, this should not be a picture of themselves. Choose an avatar instead. It could be a favorite cartoon character or photograph.

I recommend children hide their ages on social-networking sites. If criminals get access, they will be attracted to younger users. On Facebook, children don't have to show their birthdays to anyone. Click edit at the top of the screen. In the Basic tab, look at the last drop-down menu under Birthday. Change it to "Don't show my birthday in my profile."

Facebook profiles can contain a lot of personal information. Kids shouldn't post anything they wouldn't want going public. That includes home address, location of after-school activities and favorite hangouts. Facebook has spots for more information than is necessary or safe. When editing the profile, they shouldn't be afraid to leave fields blank.

Privacy Settings
Facebook has robust privacy settings. Take advantage of them.

Click on privacy at the top of the page. This is the Privacy Overview page. First, click on Profile. From here children can choose who can view their profiles. Remember, only people in their networks and friends list can access their profile.

Making the profile viewable by friends only is a good idea. It lets kids personally approve of everyone who can access the profile. Select "Only my friends" from the Profile drop-down menu. Don't worry about the other options on the page. All the other options follow the Profile setting. It's not visible, but each is now set to "Only my friends."

Head back to the Privacy Overview page. Next, click on Search. This is a powerful privacy tool. The last step determined who could view the profile. This one lets children restrict who can search for their profile.

Find the "Which Facebook users can find me in search?" drop-down menu. By default, it is set to Everyone. When someone searches for your child, they'll see the profile's search listing. This is only the profile picture, name and network. Without access to the full profile, that's all the information they can get.

I suggest setting the drop-down menu to "All my networks and all my friends." Only those in your children's networks and friends lists will find them. Say your children's profiles are in a high school network. Only other students and friends will find them in search results.

Temporary access
Go back to the Privacy Overview page. Click on Poke, Message and Friend Request. Users can receive a poke (short greeting), message or friend request from other users. They may not normally be able to view that person's profile. But because they were contacted, they're given temporary access. This lets them check the other person's profile before responding.

This feature works both ways. Say your child was tricked into messaging a stranger. That person would then have temporary access to your child's profile. This would happen regardless of other privacy settings.

Thankfully, children can also customize this temporary view. They will select which parts of their profile others will see. Once in the Poke, Message and Friend Request settings, look under Information. Uncheck the boxes next to any information they don't want visible. This won't affect network or friends list users.

These settings should provide sufficient privacy for children's accounts. Their profiles will only be accessible by approved friends. Only users in the same network will find them in search results. And even if they contact strangers, their information will be protected.