



Be Smart on Facebook

There are a lot of privacy controls these days – why not use them?

By [The Online Mom](#)



To coincide with its fifth birthday, [Facebook](#) recently announced that it now has a staggering 175 million active members around the world. (Facebook defines an active member as one that has used the service some time in the last 30 days – a pretty fair measure.)

The huge membership roll gives us a better perspective on the occasional problems that come up with the service and which are eagerly jumped on by the press. For example, much was made of [the recent announcement](#) that Facebook had purged over 5,500 registered sex offenders from its membership lists. Now, one sex offender is one too many as far as I am concerned but if you consider the fact that they represent a mere 0.0032% of the active membership then it doesn't seem quite so threatening.

The reality is that millions of teens, college kids and now parents are happily logging onto Facebook to connect with close and not-so-close friends and family, post pictures and videos, swap comments and messages, and generally use the service exactly as the founders intended.

However, judging from the number of questions “The Online Mom” gets from parents, there is still a lot of anxiety about younger, vulnerable family members posting private information on the Internet, no matter how popular the site might have become. For these parents, the constant flow of scary Internet stories registers far more than the dubious benefits of online social networking and they wonder what safeguards are in place.

Well, the good news is that Facebook and the other major social networking sites have made tremendous strides over the last few years to finally provide some meaningful security options. Let's take a quick look at some of basics.

Don't give too much away

When you first join Facebook you are asked to provide a profile. A Facebook user's profile is broken down into four distinct sections: Basic Information, Personal Information, Contact Information, and Education and Work. The kind of information you can provide under these headings varies from the innocuous – what's your favorite TV show – to the highly personal – your relationship status, religious views, etc.

The thing to remember when completing these sections is that none of them are compulsory; you can provide as little information as possible – i.e. nothing – or as much as you feel comfortable with. You will not be excluded from Facebook or have your account downgraded in any way if you provide nothing more than the minimum. It all depends on how open you want to be or how easy you want to make it for people to find you.

For younger account users, we would recommend that information be kept to a minimum. No home address; no school names; no telephone numbers. No information that would allow a stranger to find out where a person lives or help them make direct contact. Friends will already have that information and anyone else that wants it should not be able to get it through Facebook.



The other option you have in the profile section is to upload a picture. Here you can upload a favorite photo – nothing provocative or suggestive please – or you can get creative. If you're not comfortable with a picture on such a well-trafficked site, maybe go online and create an avatar or upload an image of a pet instead.

Understand your privacy options

Once you have set up your picture and profile, the next step is to adjust your privacy settings. Again, privacy settings are divided into four areas: Profile, Search, News Feed and Wall, and Applications. Facebook assigns a fairly intelligent mix of default settings to new users, allowing only friends to see your profile and personal information unless you open the information to a wider audience.

Facebook also allows you to customize your privacy settings, either by selecting or excluding friends that can see certain information. Unfortunately, this is the way that a lot of kids get around the fact that their parents are listed as friends; they can use the customize option to specifically exclude them from seeing updates, photos, videos and other info that would normally appear on their page.

As the Search setting implies, it allows you to control what people see when they search for you. Here, not surprisingly, Facebook defaults to an open search setting. After all, helping people find people is really what they are all about. However, you can change the settings so non-friends can't see your picture, your friend list, or other select information. If you've no more room in your life for additional friends, you can even take down the 'add me as a friend' link!

News Feed and Wall deal with whether any profile updates, posts or comments you make on your Facebook are published to your friends. Again, Facebook defaults to an open book relationship, so if you change your relationship status for example, all your friends will know about it unless you uncheck the appropriate box.

The News Feed and Wall settings page is also worth a visit to find out what stories or actions will not be published. It's reassuring to know that if you reject someone as a friend – or they reject you – that rejection is not broadcast to the world!

The final stop on the security settings is Applications. This area is often overlooked or misunderstood but it's becoming increasingly important as social networking applications become more common and ever smarter.

A typical application, and one that Facebook itself makes available through Facebook Photos, is the ability to create a photo album. Other applications include the thousands of games that can be accessed through Facebook or specialized search tools. The application settings allow you to limit the amount of information that is collected by the developers and distributors of these applications when you download them to your Facebook page. This is an area that will no doubt be receiving more attention as the huge list of applications continues to grow and users become more aware of the [additional unintended exposure](#).

Hopefully, this quick review of the available privacy settings will ease some of the fears over online social networking. For parents, the best approach is to never let a child under 13 have a Facebook or [MySpace](#) page and make sure you are there to help when they finally get to set the account up. A little attention to detail at the start of their online socializing goes a long way to making sure that friends are really friends and private information stays private.