Common Sense on
Privacy & Digital Footprints

Our teens live in a culture of sharing. Exchanging texts, photos, and videos lets kids express themselves, strengthen relationships, and get recognition from friends. But sometimes kids are tempted to share private information – and if they're not careful, it can harm their reputations. Anything created online can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in a heartbeat. Your teen may think he or she just sent something to a friend, but that friend can send it to a friend's friend, who can send it to their friends' friends, and so on. By helping them think about their decisions, you can help them steer the right course.

Here are some common sense tips on privacy and digital footprints:

Help them think through their motivations. Do you really want everyone to know that about you? Are you sending this because you want to, or because someone is pressuring you? How do you think this will affect other people?

Help teens think long term. Explain to teens that everything you put online leaves a digital footprint. Once it is out there is can be shared, stored and copied, making it difficult, if not impossible, to completely delete it later.

Sometimes personal information is best kept private. Help teens define which information is important for them to keep private when they're online, such as addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.

Encourage the use of privacy settings on social network pages. Urge teens to think carefully about the nature of their relationships (close friends, family, acquaintances, strangers) and adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

Remind teens to be careful about their friends' privacy. Passing along a rumor or identifying someone in a picture (called "tagging") affects other people's privacy. If your teen is uncomfortable being tagged in friends' photos, they can enable a setting on some social media platforms that allows them to pre-approve all tags, or ask the poster to remove the tag. But beyond that, there's not too much they can do. Get your teens into the habit of asking permission before posting something about someone else.

The Golden Rule applies online. If a teen wouldn't want someone to post something about them, then they shouldn't post it about someone else either. Pretty easy to remember.