

Guide to Developing Healthy Digital Relationships



INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a great tool for information, business, and entertainment. Above all, it is a *communication* medium. In this sense, it is a place for *relationships*; the Internet connects people to other people. During the past decade, social media tools and websites— instant messaging, Facebook, Skype, Twitter, LinkedIn, eHarmony, etc.—have grown tremendously in popularity. You can use social media to connect with people who share a common interest in crocheting, find a roommate, or even begin a

loving relationship. Connecting to others online—whether strangers, acquaintances, or friends and family—has become, for many, part of everyday life.

When we use social media, we open ourselves up to true social experiences. We create a web of relationships, not unlike our physical social experiences. In our daily communities—school, work, or in our neighborhoods—it is important to be aware of the benefits and risks each social situation presents, and to maintain personal boundaries when developing relationships. The same is true for socializing online. The relationships we form online can be fulfilling, enriching, and meaningful. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly common for people to develop close friendships and loving relationships through the Internet. But, they can also turn out to be hurtful, deceitful, and even dangerous. How can you, your child, or a loved one avoid the pitfalls? How can you be sure to develop *healthy* digital relationships?

In addition to the “three keys,” the value of making media a family affair cannot be over-stressed. Here are some quick tips for incorporating social media into family life.



Three keys to healthy digital relationship development:

1. Know the sites and tools you are using
2. Understand the differences between online and in-person socializing
3. Set personal boundaries, and involve family members or friends

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Alex has been involved with the LAMP since 2010. Her passion for media literacy began in high school. As a self-proclaimed first generation IM-er, Alex was fascinated by the shifts in face-to-face interpersonal communication she witnessed as more and more of her classmates began chatting on Instant Messaging after school. One thing was made clear: Media has a significant impact on relationships, and, for this reason, it is important to consider our relationship with media. Alex attended college at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and graduated with a BA in Media Communication. After college, Alex worked as a video and web producer for mspmag.com at Mpls. St.Paul Magazine. It wasn't long until she moved to NYC, where she earned her Masters of Arts in Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University. During her graduate study, Alex's research focused on television, digital space and structure, and narrative.

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WHAT'S THE LAMP?

The LAMP's vision is that one day media literacy will be seen as the critical requirement to understanding the world and our place in it. Educated consumers demanding more accountable media will create a ground swell to which media companies will have to respond. As part of this movement, The LAMP works in communities to build healthy relationships with all forms of media. The LAMP is for a media-savvy youth. For a more involved parent. For a modern and innovative educator. **For a critical mass.**

WHO IS THE LAMP?

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WHERE IS THE LAMP?

thelampnyc.org



SCAN THIS QR CODE WITH YOUR SMART PHONE TO GO TO OUR WEBSITE RIGHT NOW!

KEY #1:

KNOW THE SITES AND TOOLS YOU ARE USING

There are a lot of reasons why a person may develop relationships online. For many, it is simply a byproduct of using popular social media like Twitter or Facebook. Some people meet new friends while using the Internet as an outlet for a hobby. Others may have a distinct purpose or goal in mind, such as finding a roommate, a business partner, or a loving relationship.

On the Internet there are different tools and websites that facilitate these different sorts of digital interaction. Here is a brief list of some of the more common social networking sites and tools that you or members of your family might use.

Everyday Life and Friendship

- » [FACEBOOK](#)
- » [MYSFACE](#)
- » [TWITTER](#)
- » [FOURSQUARE](#)
- » [HI5](#)
- » [BEBO](#)

Social networking sites like Facebook, Bebo or MySpace have become online spaces for everyday interaction. Posting a quick note on someone's Facebook wall, for example, is a lot like posting a note on his or her locker at school, or desk at work. They provide a place and a means for continuing interaction when people aren't in the same location. While these types of sites are generally open to anyone, some sites cater to certain groups based on culture, age, location or even aspects of the site itself, like gaming or photo-sharing. For example, MySpace has a strong presence of musicians, while hi5 distinguishes itself as the place for "social gaming."

In general, these sorts of social networking sites help the user create a "social web" of all the people he or she is connected to through school, work, family, and friends. Users create their own social network by accepting and making friendship requests, and then share information about their lives by posting photos, listing interests and affiliations, and setting statuses. Many of these sites incorporate games, music, and invitation tools as well. In many ways, these sites provide means of interaction that mirror the casual, everyday interactions we have in everyday life.

TIP

LAMP suggests only accepting friend requests from people you know.



THE BASICS: FAMILY MATTERS

PARENTS: SET AN EXAMPLE

Being intimidated or indifferent towards social media can be counterproductive in teaching your children how to develop healthy relationships online. If your attitude toward socializing online is consistently fearful or disapproving, your children might think you simply don't "get it"—that you don't *understand* what social media is—and they may be less likely to heed your advice or warning. On the other hand, if you just express your fascination and enthusiasm for social media without discernment or guidance, you may be indirectly encouraging your child to indulge in online social experiences without restraint. It is best to find a balance. Spend time understanding the benefits and risks of developing online relationships and engage in online socializing yourself (find an online book club, or connect with long lost friends on Facebook). By being both engaged *and* cautious, your children will see you as an example.

KIDS: TALK TO YOUR PARENTS ABOUT IT!

Just because your parents may not be as interested or active in social media as you are doesn't mean they don't care about what you're doing. Take the time to talk to your parents about what sites you like to go to, who you like to talk with, and why. If they aren't familiar with online social networking, teach them!

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The location of a family computer can play a large role in how you and your family view online interaction. The LAMP recommends keeping the computer in an open, common area. Not only will this help you keep an eye on your child's online interactions, but it will also foster an understanding of online socializing as an activity that is meaningful and that should be integrated into family life.

Career or Professional

- » [LINKEDIN](#)
- » [PLAXO](#)
- » [MYWORKSTER](#)
- » [JOBFOX](#)

The Internet has become a great place for professional networking. Sites like LinkedIn or Plaxo can be thought of as an online "mixer" where you can share your business card or resume, and be introduced to other professionals in your current or desired field of work. If you are looking

for employment, want to connect a friend with some of your contacts, or search for a potential partner in business, a professional networking site is a great place to start. Certain career-oriented social networking sites may specialize in a certain sector of the workforce. For instance, MyWorkster is exclusively for college students. Other sites, like JobFox, approach job-hunting as match making, and specialize in finding jobs that are the best fit for you. On websites like these, people maintain a professional presence. Unlike some of the “everyday” social networking sites, profiles on career sites are typically résumés or CVs where people present life experiences, accomplishments, goals, and hobbies, providing a rich glimpse into who you are as a professional and a person.

Common Interest and Hobbies

- » [FLICKR](#)
- » [ROTOWIRE](#)
- » [GOOGLE BLOGS](#)

Many people use social media as an outlet for a hobby or interest. Digital communities are built around just about every type of hobby you can imagine—fantasy sports, cooking, scrap-booking, fishing, snowmobiling, photography, skydiving. . . you name it! A lot of these communities form around personal blogs or websites. However, there are some larger outlets like Flickr, a photo-sharing site, that create a broader space for people to share their work, stories, and ideas. To find a blog about a certain interest or hobby, try going to Google Blogs—Google’s search engine dedicated to blogs—and search for whatever you like!

TIP

If you can’t find a blog you like, why not create one yourself? There are several blogging engines that provide users the option to create a blog for free! The LAMP recommends [Tumblr](#), [Blogger](#), or [WordPress](#).

Dating Sites

- » [EHARMONY](#)
- » [MATCH.COM](#)
- » [OKCUPID](#)
- » [ZOOSK](#)

Life is busy. Between family, work, school, and other commitments, it can be difficult to meet people. To compensate for the constraints of our busy schedules, many people have signed up for online dating sites. Some sites are free, while others charge a fee for their service. Typically, these sites ask you to provide

information about yourself—personality, interests, etc.—as well as the qualities you’re looking for in a potential partner. Some sites specialize in doing the matchmaking for you, by cross-referencing user profiles and presenting a list of people that seem to best fit what each person is looking for. Other sites leave the search up to the user, so he or she can browse other profiles for a person they’d like to get to know. These sites are designed to be more personal than other social networking sites, so it is very important to think through exactly what you want to share before diving in!

Other: Instant Messaging

- » [AOLIM](#)
- » [SKYPE](#)
- » [WINDOWS LIVE MESSENGER](#)
- » [YAHOO! MESSENGER](#)
- » [MEEBO](#)
- » [GTALK](#)



Ten years ago, there were only a handful of instant messaging services. Today, it is common for websites to have their own instant messaging tool. This allows casual online interactions to happen easily and frequently. The ability to send and receive messages instantaneously mimics face-to-face “chatting,” and, because of this reason, can be a significant part in the development of relationships.

CAUTION!

In all online interaction, privacy must be protected. Be sure to look at the security settings of any social networking site or tool you use to make sure you are aware of exactly what you are sharing with the world!

It’s a good idea to periodically check out a site’s privacy features and your privacy settings. Social networking sites are constantly evolving, and their privacy options do change over time. You can usually find more information in a site’s Help area—for example, click here for an overview on how to control what you share with [Facebook](#).

KEY #2:

UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE AND IN-PERSON SOCIALIZING

There are a number of significant differences between online interactions and in-person interactions. Understanding what the differences are, and the effects that they can have, is an important part of healthy digital relationship development.

Physical markers

When we interact with people in-person—whether we are consciously aware of it or not—our opinions and understanding of others are formed by much more than just the words being spoken. We consider facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, appearance, eye contact, and other physical context cues. We use these to help us discern whether or not we find the other person trustworthy or genuine. When interacting online we generally have to make do with just words. Because this is the case, it is important to maintain a skeptical mentality. Take your time when establishing trust with someone.

Anonymity

Online, it is difficult to know with full certainty exactly who you are interacting with. A person's screen name on IM or profile on Facebook cannot be trusted at face value to be representative of the actual user. This is not to say that every person you interact with online is an impostor or should be feared. All it means is that, again, is important to maintain a healthy level of skepticism. Simply put: Keep your guard up.

Disinhibition

It is a well noted phenomenon that when interacting with others online, people often feel freer to do and say things that they likely wouldn't do or say during face-to-face interaction. This disinhibition is attributed to a number of personal and psychological factors, but at its most fundamental level, it is rooted in dissociation and an empowering sense of invisibility. Thus, online, we may feel moved to share emotions and express ourselves more freely. While this can be a good thing, especially for those who are shy in face-to-face interaction, there is a dark side to disinhibition. People may also feel as though there are no tangible consequences to their actions. Cyberbullying is an unfortunate example of this dark side. When socializing online, be sure to avoid it by asking yourself if you'd say to someone's face what you're willing to say to them online.

REAL-LIFE STORIES OF HEALTHY DIGITAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

What sort of relationships do people develop online, and how? There is practically no limit to what sorts of relationships people can develop online. Here are a couple of true-life examples of *healthy* relationships that were cultivated over the Internet on social networking sites and tools.

1. A woman joined a Flickr photo group that shares a common interest in standard poodles. Through sharing photos and stories of each other's dogs, the people in the community learned more and more about each other's lives and families, and many fulfilling friendships were formed. Years later, these friends have flown halfway around the world to visit each other, sent each other birthday gifts and have been a strong support system for each other through difficult times. To this day, the woman says her "Flickr friends" are some of her best friends. While these relationships were forming, she spoke with other friends and family members about her Flickr friends, speaking in detail her interactions and asking for advice on how to handle invitations to meet face-to-face. By keeping her loved ones in the loop, a deeper trust was developed with her Flickr friends because she was able to feel supported. Then, when the time came to meet some of her online friends, she arranged to have them all over to her home for a weekend while her husband and kids were present.
2. A twenty-year-old girl was using a social networking site as a place to connect with her friends, and was e-troduced (introduced through friends online) to a boy with whom she discovered she had much in common. After spending over a year becoming good friends online, they decided to meet face-to-face. He flew from California to visit her in Minnesota with the permission of her family. They spent time getting to know one another face-to-face, while spending time with her family and close friends. During the next year the two visited each other several times and they introduced each other to their other friends and extended family. Today, the two are a happily married couple.

What makes these examples of healthy digital relationships? In both cases the interaction was grounded in the physical world and lives of the people. The users demonstrated discretion and set up personal boundaries. Friends and family members were aware of the developing digital relationships, and were consulted and involved in the development of the relationship.



What goes online, stays online

It's nearly impossible to take back anything that you put online. A message meant for one friend can get copied or forwarded to others. Photos and videos can be circulated without your intention. This means it is important to be considerate of yourself and others when socializing and sharing online.

KEY #3:

SET PERSONAL BOUNDARIES, AND INVOLVE FAMILY MEMBERS OR FRIENDS

As we've said, people can develop healthy and meaningful relationships online. But, with all of the bad experiences we hear about on the news—cyberbullying, scams, and sexual predators—well, it can be a bit unnerving. These occurrences understandably cause people to view online interaction as a risky behavior. However, it must be kept in mind that, while harmful experiences like these can and have happened, they are not the norm *and they can be prevented*. So far we've gone over the sites and tools people may use for online socializing, and what to be aware of when engaging with others online. The third key is all about *you*. The most certain way to ensure you only develop healthy digital relationships is by setting and maintaining personal boundaries, and involving family members or friends.

As young children we learn not to talk to strangers or get into a car with anyone we don't know. As teenagers, we learn to distinguish true friendship and affection from abuse and manipulation. As adults, we learn how to balance personal and professional responsibility and respect with co-workers and relatives. But, the rules and boundaries we learn and teach our children for healthy relationships in our physical interactions don't always translate clearly for digital interactions. [See Exercise #1] This is because online communication has its own set of risks and benefits that differs from face-to-face communication.

Let's say some members of an online community decide to meet up for coffee, or the friend you met on a film forum asks you to go to a movie, or someone you've met on a dating site asks you to go out for dinner, and you want to go. What should you do?

Ask yourself: What do I really know about this person?

Discuss it with your family and friends. Does it seem like a good idea?

Choose a safe, public place to meet, and ALWAYS tell a loved one exactly when and where you are going.

Bring a friend with you! Meeting an online friend in person for the first time is a big step, and the other

person should think so too. Making the first meeting a group event is a great way to keep it safe and ease the transition of taking an online relationship face-to-face.

CONCLUSION

Developing digital relationships has its own set of complications and benefits, but it need not be a scary endeavor. By being prepared and aware you can reap the benefits of online relationships while avoiding the risks.

EXERCISE: HOW DOES IT TRANSLATE?

Read and think about the relationship statement on the left. Determine the heart of the advice, and what is it trying to prevent or encourage. Then, write down what you think would be the online equivalent.

Consider this: Some advice will translate easily, some advice won't. Think outside of the box!

- Don't talk to strangers
- Don't accept a ride from a stranger
- Don't give a ride to a stranger
- Make eye contact while speaking
- If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all
- When being bullied, just walk away
- Use good listening skills when a friend is sharing an experience or emotion with you
- Think before you speak
- Keep your hands and feet to yourself
- Any others?

