Don't Track in Dirt with your Digital Footprint
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With over 1.5 billion web surfers worldwide, photos and videos have the ability to reach millions within seconds. Our digital footprint - the content available about us online (including text, photographs, audio and, video) is traceable and permanent. With people generating viral content around-the-clock, they are potentially damaging reputations, future job opportunities or even attracting online predators. It is more important than ever to educate younger generations about what they could be leaving behind.

Rather than teach specifics from program to program, it is important as educators that we teach broad safety concepts to enable the critical thinking of youth while online. Critical decision making will enable a lifetime of safe Internet use regardless of the newest programs or websites that emerge.

Here are a few key things the tech-savvy members of Generation Y need to be taught and remember when it comes to keeping their digital footprint clean:

The Internet is public

If your friends, significant other or family can see it, so can everyone else. This includes employers, colleagues, coaches and teachers. Even if you are currently too young to start thinking about a career, more and more employers are searching the web for information on potential candidates including Google, Facebook, Twitter and blogs; information that will still be available years later when you enter the job market.

A recent CareerBuilder study found that 26% of all hiring managers use search engines to research potential applicants, and a staggering 50% of recruiters for college graduate jobs exhibited the same behavior. Additionally, a recent study by the University of Massachusetts' Center for Market Research found that 26% of college admission offices use search engines to research applicants. (iKeepSafe, 2008) Without even knowing it, you can cost yourself an education, athletic scholarship or your dream job.

The Internet is viral and not in your control

It only takes seconds for a text message, email or Tweet to go viral and spread like wildfire. With the ever-growing "sexting" epidemic among teens, it is important to know the consequences. A revengeful Florida boy e-mailed and texted previously received nude photos of his former 16-year-old girlfriend to more than 70 people, including her parents, grandparents and teachers. He was then charged with transmitting child pornography, and is now a registered sex offender — a label he must carry until he is 43. (Prieto, 2009)

Before you click send, ask some questions:

- Is there anything in this picture or video that will tell the world too much personal information about me?
- Do I want to be asked about that comment, video or picture at a job interview in 10 years?
- What message am I sending about myself with this post?

Once it is there, it is there forever

In this era of e-mail, texting, blogging and social networking, trying to hide your digital footprint is practically impossible. In fact, the Library of Congress has acquired the entire Twitter archive, which includes all tweets since March 2006. (CNN, 2010) By posting personal information – even information you do not *think* you are sending to the general public – you are susceptible to cyber bullying, online predators and physical harm. According to a 2008 study by National Crime Prevention, up to as many as 8.7 million American teens are bullied online every year. (National Crime Prevention Council, 2008) Information you think may be private can still lure physical predators, finding out where you go to school, where you live, when you're home babysitting or who you hang out with on a Friday night.

Not all publicity is good publicity

More and more people have begun to actively search out the digital footprint of peers and are influenced by what they find by forming opinions and judgments from what they've seen in the social media world. For example, Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps lost a Kellogg's sponsorship and tainted his reputation after a photo surfaced of the athlete smoking marijuana.

What you say, post or upload sends a message about who you are. Parts of your digital footprint such as uploaded photographs, blog posts, YouTube videos or Facebook wall posts might not depict how you would like to be portrayed now, or in the future.

In an era where Facebook has over 6 million page views per minute and Twitter pumps out 50 million traceable Tweets a day, it is imperative that everyone gets a firm understanding of their own digital footprint. For parents, conversations on this topic and general Internet safety are essential for their children. For teachers, educating and effectively utilizing Internet technologies in a school setting will both enhance the learning experience as well as enable students to safely communicate about their online lives. To help young people understand the depth of their digital footprint, families and schools should open up a dialogue on the importance of their digital footprint and how to keep it positive.

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