We are...

A group of psychology researchers at the University of Guelph. We have been conducting research on the effects of new media on communications and relationships.

Questions?

If you have questions, want copies of this brochure or would like to request a presentation, please contact either:

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What we know

You can learn a lot about someone by checking them out online. Facebook users share their birthday, their email address, their hometown, and many other pieces of personal information to an average of 230 Facebook “friends,” many of whom they do not know very well. Depending on your privacy settings and your age, this information is often shared with a network of people as wide as the Internet itself, some of whom may use your personal information without your awareness. It is important to think carefully about what information you want to share online and with whom.

Sharing information on Facebook is now a way of being part of your social world, but not everyone shares the same amount of information. Our research suggests that two personal characteristics – the importance of being popular and the awareness of the potential consequences of sharing personal information – predict who is more likely to share personal information or control their information using Facebook’s privacy settings.

Why it’s important

Facebook now has 400 million users worldwide and for those over 18 information posted on it is searchable on the Internet. Facebook and other online tools are changing the nature of privacy and the consequences of sharing information with others. Here are two things to remember. First, the information you share online is permanent. Second, when you share personal information online you lose control of it – it can be searched, shared, and used more widely than you may anticipate.

The news media have reported on cases in which students have been suspended from school, students have lost scholarships, employers have made hiring decisions, and people have been criminally charged based on information found on Facebook. Also, people have reported being bullied, harassed, and teased online, as well receiving unwanted contact by strangers.

What can you do about it?

We know it is important to you to keep up with your friends online, but here are some tips for being safer.

Do these things regularly:
• Parents and children should sit down together to learn about the privacy settings and read the privacy policy.
• Never add a complete stranger to your list of friends. Check who they are before accepting them as a friend. Even with your regular contacts be sure to consider whether someone is really a friend before adding them to your friends list.
• Friendships change, so if you no longer consider someone a friend delete them or limit their access to your information.
• Learn what happens when you share information online. Teachers and families should talk about how this information might be used now and in the future.
• Come up with a plan for dealing with situations that make you uncomfortable on Facebook – what to do and who to tell.
• Check to see how your page looks to others so you know what you are sharing. Are you sharing something with everyone that you would rather keep private?
• Remember that Facebook makes popularity seem more important. Think twice about what you are sharing and who you are sharing it with.