

Common Sense on Online Self-Expression

What's the Issue?

The online world provides a space to be whoever you want to be. Teens may occasionally try out different personas in the real world, but the Internet can be a virtual testing ground for experimenting with alternate identities. Teens explore their identities by creating screen names, avatars, profiles, posting pictures and videos of themselves, or pretending to be someone else altogether.

Why Does It Matter?

Trying out different identities online can be a healthy way for teens to explore who they want to be. Exploration online can allow teens to seek out support and resources not readily available offline. However, being anonymous sometimes allows teens to push limits and act in ways they wouldn't act in the real world. They might explore risky or rebellious personas, which could create a negative reputation that might follow them offline. In addition, being anonymous or using a different persona online might lead teens into unhealthy situations (for example, a teen girl connecting with a pro-anorexia website). Furthermore, when teens communicate anonymously or through a disguised identity, they lack accountability. This separation of action and consequence makes irresponsible behavior, such as cyberbullying, more likely. So although trying out different personas online can be beneficial, it can also be problematic.

What Families Can Do

Do you know of anyone who is "fake" or exaggerates online? What do you think about that?

If someone were to find out who you are by searching you online, what would they learn? What kind of person might they think you are?

common sense says

Exploration is a part of growing up. Teens may try out different personas online, or exaggerate things about themselves, but this is a normal part of figuring out who they are and who they want to be in the world.

If you see your teen trying out a problematic persona, ask about it. Don't be too quick to worry or judge, but ask questions about why they made the choices they did.

Ask teens who they want to be in their online life. Remind teens they have the power to shape their reputation and who they are online. They also have the power to affect others positively or negatively through how they present themselves.