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MEMBER

Talk to Senior Loved Ones About Safe Social Networking

As noted in the February 2010 issue of Caring Right at Home (see website below), seniors are using new technology to enhance social connections. Email, social networking sites like Facebook and online communities are all growing in popularity, allowing seniors to keep connected like never before. But many older adults hesitate to go online because they feel apprehensive about hackers, scammers and identity theft.

It's true that scammers, who often target older adults, have moved into the online realm. What should older adults know about safe social networking? And how can families talk to senior loved ones about the subject without scaring them away from these new socialization tools? When it comes to online security, knowledge is power. Here are 10 ways to stay safe:

1. Get to know the privacy settings of social networking sites where you participate. You can choose who can and can't see your information.
2. Don't post information or photos that you wouldn't want shared with the world. Even if you intend for only a select group to see a post, someone in your network might pass something along that you would rather keep private.
3. On Facebook and other social networking sites, don't indiscriminately "friend" everyone who asks. Verify the identity of people who want to see your information, or who request to join an online community where you discuss personal matters.
4. If you are in doubt that an email or post is really from a person you know, pick up the phone and verify it. Hackers can set up a fake account or even take over the account of someone you know. And it is very easy to create a false "persona" online. Be cautious about giving out personal information or meeting in person with an acquaintance from a chat room or online community.
5. If you receive an email or post from a friend that seems to be selling something or just doesn't sound right, don't feel hesitant to ask them about it; your friend's account may have been hacked without them realizing it.
6. Never respond to a request for money from someone claiming to be a friend or a stranger in need. Scammers can pretend to be someone you know, or may create a false identity to appeal to your sympathy.

7. In email, online community and social networking sites, be cautious clicking on links, even from friends. If you click on a link that asks you to download a "viewer" or other software, don't!
8. Use a hard-to-hack password for Facebook, Twitter, email and other accounts. Don't select your birthday, your pet's name, or anything else that could be easily guessed. Be sure to include a combination of numbers, letters and special characters.
9. The creators of viruses and other malware (malicious software) are constantly refining their attacks, so be sure to install anti-virus software and keep it up-to-date.
10. Learn about some of the most common scams you might encounter. See the websites at the end of this article for some good resources.

Talking to Older Loved Ones about Online Security

With all the publicity about keeping children safe online, it's easy to forget that people of any age can fall prey to hackers, identity theft and fraud—and seniors who are just starting beginning to go online may be less aware about the pitfalls of online social networking. So if your parent or other senior friend is new to online communication, it's a good idea to have a conversation about security. But remember: the goal is to empower older adults, not to scare them offline. Here are some ideas for having a productive conversation:

- Talk about "we" rather than "you." Anyone can fall prey to online con artists. Open the discussion with, "Here are some things I've learned to keep myself safe that I'd like to share with you."
- Remind your loved one that the same cautions he or she practices in everyday life will also be useful online. Do a bit of role playing: "What would you do if someone asked you for money? What if they told you that you'd won a contest and only needed to send a 'fee' to collect?"
- Establish a no-judgment zone. Reassure your loved one that if something seems suspicious or just doesn't feel right, it's fine to give you a call for advice, without embarrassment.
- Think intergenerational! Many families report that grandkids and grandparents bond over tech support. Grandparents benefit from the abilities of the younger generation, and grandkids can feel good about helping their senior loved ones.
- Encourage your loved one to share what he or she has learned with other seniors in the community. Many older adults have volunteered with **AARP** and other groups to spread the word and keep the online world safe for the millions of seniors who are enjoying friendship and healthier aging in this new way.

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