

Stay safe on Facebook

Social networking allows people to be part of a virtual community and to expand their social contacts by making new relationships through shared interests or existing connections. These connections may include having attended the same school or living in the same town. Social networking websites allow individuals to construct an online profile, define a list of users with whom they share a connection and to view the connections made by others. The internet's potential to facilitate such connections has only recently been recognized which has led to the proliferation of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, Flickr, LinkedIn, MySpace, and many more too numerous to mention.

If you read the paper or watch the news you will have heard of Facebook. Rather than being a technology that's only for young people, Facebook is a social networking website that can be useful for people of all ages.

Many people use Facebook to track down old friends particularly from high school or university. Once initially located and contacted over Facebook many of these people become real friends with each other and catch up in conventional ways such as phone calls or email. Facebook is not designed to completely replace individual contact, but it is useful for keeping up to date with people who you do not regularly phone or email but with whom you still have an interest.

When you first join Facebook you are required to set up a profile page. This is a page which displays your photo and information about you. The bare minimum that you need to supply is your name, birth date and email address. You can upload details such as your address, your place of employment and schools you attended. If you are not careful about your privacy settings or who you accept as a friend, this collection of personal details can lead to identity theft. For this reason I encourage people to be very conservative with how much information they put on their Facebook page. I recommend you only provide your name, birth date and birth month, but not the year of birth, and the town or city you live in rather than your full address. Many people even chose to not upload photos of themselves, instead they put photos of their animals or of a celebrity to give an extra layer of privacy.

After you have signed up to Facebook it won't be long before someone wants to add you as a friend. A 'friend' on Facebook may be family, a real life friend, an acquaintance, a work colleague or a stranger. In the early days of Facebook there was almost an unspoken competition where people tried to accumulate as many friends as possible and would accept friend requests from people they did not know at all. Now as we are learning more about ways that online scams and hackers operate most Facebook users are becoming more judicious about who they become 'friends' with and many people will not accept friend requests even from acquaintances. I suggest never accepting a friend request from someone you don't know as the risk of identity theft is just too high. You can make a friend request to another person, but in a similar way they do not have to accept your friend request. If you choose to use Facebook for the purpose of making new friends I suggest you start by sending Facebook messages. A Facebook message allows you to contact somebody without having to accept them as a friend, this way you can communicate with the person without allowing access to your profile information. This way you may decide not to continue communicating with the person and you have not placed your profile information at risk.

If you comment on a friend's page, your friends friends can see your comment and view your profile page even if they are not your friend. To overcome this you should set your security settings so only your friends can view your profile.

Facebook allows you to make announcements to a group of friends. Friends online will see the announcement instantly and your friends who aren't online will see the announcement next time they are online. Announcements can be made by updating your status or by sending a private message through Facebook. To update your status use the box that says: "What's on your mind?" This is called "posting". If you need to communicate something personal I advise you to send a private message rather than posting. This is because any of your friends friends can read the post, and depending on the content you may embarrass yourself or your friend with a public post.

It is possible to set up groups so certain types of 'friends' for example family or work colleagues can view certain parts but not all of the material you load on your Facebook page. This is useful when content is appropriate for family but is not work appropriate such as your plans for the weekend.

It is possible to tag people in photos you upload to your page. If you tag a friend in a photo, their name will display when people view the photo. You need to be careful of the types of photos you

upload and whether or not you choose to tag people, as they may not want to be identified in compromising photos. For this reason it is a good idea to ask permission before uploading a photo of someone.

As with everything on the internet, it hasn't taken hackers long to devise ways of misusing Facebook. Hackers will access accounts, pretend to be someone they are not and will send out viruses disguised in legitimate looking links. If the link 'seems' to have come from your friend you will often follow it without maintaining your normal online safety commonsense, because you assume your friend won't send something unsafe to you. An antivirus with a link scanner or anti-phishing filter is the best way to stay safe while online.

Some business and organisations use Facebook to find new customers and audiences who they would not normally communicate with through conventional (and often more expensive) methods of promotion. Facebook is a way of spreading the word about a new product or service as it disseminates through peoples networks of friends.

Facebook can be accessed from any computer with the internet, but as mobile phone technology increases many people update Facebook while they are out during the day. This has added a new level of immediacy as people can update their Facebook while they are experiencing an event, they don't have to wait until they are at home at the computer after the event.

If you or an organisation you represent would like to start a Facebook page and you would like assistance with how to do it, or if you just have questions about Facebook, drop in and see Josh at the Internet Centre in Main Street next to the Library or give me a call on 6343 1720.