

Helping Kids Understand Their ‘Digital Footprint’

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This is a guest editorial by McAfee.

It's easy to talk in general about an important topic and apply a catchy phrase to it without our kids *really* ever understanding it. When it comes to explaining the weight of their digital footprint kids can quickly glaze over and check out if we fail to speak in terms that matter to *them*.

Start by defining the term simply.

Try this: A digital footprint, much like your fingerprint, is the unique activity trail you leave online. Everyone has one. Your digital footprint includes “hard” information that the Internet gathers about you through your email, your online registrations, your video and photo uploads and your combined activity on social networks. A digital footprint also includes “soft” information such as the *impression* you leave through your overall words, photos and interactions with others.

Explain to your child that a digital footprint is kind of like an invisible report card that accumulates over the years and is a general reflection of their online activity. His digital footprint can appear positive, negative, or somewhere in between. It's really his choice.

3 Things that Matter to Your Digital Footprint:

1. **How You Protect Your Privacy.** You can be protective or careless about your online presence, your passwords, your social profiles and what information you “let in” your PC or phone. Your digital footprint is compromised when someone steals your personal information through links, malware, and scams. Privacy settings and [security safeguards](#) are critical to protecting your digital footprint.
2. **How You Express Yourself.** The Internet is permanent so anything you have shared online gives others a collective snapshot of who you are, what you value, and what kind of interaction they might expect from you. This online reputation is critical as you build relationships, pursue your goals, and seek employment. Being genuine and having integrity online impact your digital footprint. *What* you share is as important as *how* you share it.
3. **How You Respect Others.** Honoring others online and showing respect for ideas is not only a matter of integrity but it's also the law. Copyright laws govern how to share and cite content created by others. The respect you show for the rules of social networks, other people's opinions and ideas, and the respect you show for school policies and the law . . . become characteristics of your digital footprint.

Teaching your kids about their digital footprint is like teaching them about any other value such as being responsible or telling the truth. It's an on-going conversation that changes from child to early adulthood.

What you teach your child will fluctuate with your child's age but the younger you can begin the conversation, the better.

It's important not to come down on your child with rigid rules or criticism about how they may or may not value their digital footprint. Like so many other things: They don't know what they don't know and it's our job to teach them.

So pace yourself. Just begin the conversation and commit to keep it going.



Consider asking these questions when you don't agree with what your son or daughter has posted online:

- *Is this something you really want everyone to know that about you?*
- *What do you think this photo communicates about you (use adjectives)?*
- *Have you considered what the parents of your friends, a teacher or a coach might think of you or your friend if they saw that post?*
- *How do you think that person would feel if he or she saw your post about them a few years from now?*