

Lots of us have probably heard the phrases ‘digital footprint’ or ‘digital tattoo’, but what do they really mean? And, how should a parent approach this topic with their child?

What is a digital footprint or tattoo?

It’s a digital record of everything you’ve ever put online. This could include:

- Comments, likes or tweets on social media
- Facebook status updates or posts
- Photos you share
- Blog posts
- Videos and vlogs
- Public profiles on websites



1. Stephane Moussie, CC BY

Even if you delete any one of these, they may still be out there - either saved or shared by others, or kept by the website or app itself.

Why is it important?

Your digital footprint is your *online reputation*. As we now spend so much of our time in online spaces, your online reputation is just as important as it is in the real world. Often, it’s somebody’s *first impression* of you - it’s not uncommon for someone to google you before they meet you – perhaps before a job interview.

First impressions count, so you want your digital footprint to be positive, and to represent the best side of you; free of any potentially embarrassing or negative content.

Your child’s digital footprint

We probably all did things we wish we hadn’t when we were teenagers, but luckily these weren’t recorded and so are long forgotten. But today, children’s lives are constantly documented on social media, making it more likely that one of their more embarrassing decisions (like posting an overly-opinionated Facebook status update) is permanently recorded somewhere on the internet.

What can you do?

1. Be discerning

Advise them to think before they post and be discerning about what content they’re uploading, regardless of its format:

a. Images and videos

- Suggest to your child that if it isn’t something they’d be happy their grandparents seeing, or a future employer, then they shouldn’t upload it. If they insist on posting it, make sure they tweak their privacy settings accordingly, so people who aren’t friends can’t see it. It’s also important to remember that even if it’s shared privately, it can be screenshotted and sent to other people who your child didn’t intend for it to be seen by.

b. Words

- Suggest they avoid posting status updates that are too personal. If something bad has happened and they're upset or angry, posting on social media as way to vent isn't a good idea. They'll almost certainly regret it.
- Talk about social media and advise them not to post negative comments on others' pages. It doesn't show them in a good light and it's hurtful for the recipient. The old mantra 'if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all' rings just as true online as it does offline.
- Remind your child that if they're quarrelling with a friend, it's best speak to them in person, not over social media. Even if it's in a private message, it can be print screened and shared. And even if it is kept private, it's easy to misinterpret well-meaning messages on a screen.

Top tip

Remind them that their online reputation isn't any less real than their offline one. Things that you do or post online can have real life consequences. One mean comment said for a joke could result in a disciplinary meeting at school or permanently tarnish their digital footprint.

2. Maintain and check

It's a good idea to get your child into the habit of checking their online presence regularly. Think of this as digital admin.

Together with them, type their name into a search engine and see what comes up. Also do this for social media sites – log out of their account and search their name. This way, you can see how much of their profile is visible to a stranger online.

If you come across something you're not happy with – posts, comments, account profiles or photos, you can delete or de-tag them. And, if too much of their social media profile is visible, review privacy settings.

3. Build a positive online presence

Your digital footprint also provides a great opportunity to curate a lively, interesting online presence – a positive digital legacy. Also, if more compromising content is already out there, you can bury it by posting more positive things. Encourage them to be creative and show off their talents and hobbies. If they are keen writers, suggest they start up a blog, or if they enjoy taking photographs, they could post their best ones online. Having an online presence is also a good way of keeping a record of achievements, whether it's a photograph of them receiving an award or a video of them performing in a show.