Okay, Already. You Told Me What I Can't Do. What CAN I Do?

Teens tell Parry Aftab (a cyberlawyer who is also the founder of WiredSafety) and her Teenangels (Teenangels.org) that they know what *not to do* already. They want to know what they *can* do. So here goes.

You can post a picture online. Just make sure it's one your parents, principal, a predator and the police can see without you getting hurt. And for good measure, add in prospective college recruiters and employers and the love of your life too. And the picture you post should be your own. If others are in it, ask first. It's common courtesy and hopefully will be reciprocated when they are thinking about posting that picture of the two of you in sixth grade that you thought (and desperately hoped) was deleted long ago!

And be careful what you tag. Every tag identifying you in a pic is a potential sharing of too much information. A picture can say a thousand words and in cases where the pics are tagged and circulated, can come back and haunt you. Tagging makes it easier for college recruiters to see what you really do, instead of what you said on your application you do. Your parents might see you drinking at a party. Or when you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be at that time, you are outed big time.

You can have a Facebook (or other social networking) profile and still be safe. It just requires that you are choosy. You have to be choosy about who can see it and what they can see. (Visit Facebook.com/privacy and understand your privacy choices.) You can decide that one friend can see everything, but another one can't see some pics. You have to be choosy about the site itself. Who else is on that site and what kind of an impression does the site make? Fun? Freaky? Wild? Slimey? Choosing your social networks is like choosing where you want to live. Remember who your neighbors will be.

You should also delete old profiles you are no longer using. It's pretty easy if you know your login and password. But if you forgot the login and password, or aren't using the same email address you had in sixth grade when you set it up, it can be harder. Ask the network for help if you need it. Most have a procedure to shut down old profiles and prove they are yours.

You can talk to online "strangers" safely too. We know that parents will freak if they read this one. They have warned you since you were three to avoid "strangers." Then "strangers" were creepy men in black raincoats who hadn't shaved in weeks. Now "strangers" are people you don't know in real life that you have met online.

Think of it this way. If you were on a bus with your mother when you were five and an old lady sitting across the aisle compliments you on your shoes, would you run screaming from the bus? She's a "stranger" right? But she wasn't threatening, creepy or inappropriate. At the same time, your mother would not have whipped out her wallet and told the old lady that she had

bought the shoes at Walmart and paid for them with her VISA card and given the old lady the account info.

It's not talking to strangers that is the problem. It's what you talk about. This works online and offline. If you meet someone online from Australia, it would be interesting to find out what an Australian teen does for fun. Do they all have pet kangaroos? And they would have similar questions about teens from Texas. Do they all ride horses to school? And maybe they will have less boring things to share too. ☺

When communicating with new people online that you don't know in real life, remember the bus story. No credit card information ☺ and nothing you wouldn't tell a stranger on a long bus ride. And remember:

- They are not your "friends" just people you met online.

- They shouldn't get information you wouldn't give to an offline stranger.

- And that cute sixteen year old boy (or girl) you met online may not be cute, may not be sixteen and may not be a boy (or girl).

How can you be safer when meeting online friends offline?

There's no way to be entirely safe when you meet people in real life, period! And while we will tell you never to meet them in real life, some of you will ignore us and meet them anyway. The idea is to get you back safely, if you do. So, if you are going to ignore our advice about meeting people offline, you can stay safer as long as you remember:

- Go as a group. (Parry suggests bringing some sumo-wrestlers with you too. ☺) They can always give you some privacy later once the person is who they said they were. Even consider bringing a parent (if they are cool parents ☺).

. Meet in a very public place, but not a noisy one like an amusement park.

- Have an exit strategy. If you decide this was a bad idea, have a plan for leaving safely and quickly.

- Start out by telling them before you meet that your parents are waiting for you in the Mall (or wherever you are meeting) and you won't have much time. You can change that if you feel comfortable.

- Have realistic expectations. Remember that everyone lies a little, so be prepared and make sure *you* only lied a *little*.

- Take things very slowly. You may think you know and can trust them, but you only know what they said, not necessarily who they are inside. Give yourself time to get to know them in real life before taking it any further.

- Trust your gut. If things feel wrong – get out of there right away. Don't worry about hurting their feelings.

- And if it's a creep, not the person you thought you were meeting, report them. Even though your parents might find out and be very unhappy, you might be helping protect the next potential victim.