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# Social Networking in Online Communities

## i-SAFE Lesson Plan

Suggested Grade Level – Middle School

### Learning Objectives

Learners will become familiar with the various types of online communities, including dangers and benefits associated with online social networking, and tips for safe and secure online communication.

### Enrichment Goal

i-SAFE enrichment activities are designed to be implemented by students. Provide your students with the necessary reference materials included with this lesson plan and guidance on how they can complete this activity. Suggestions include getting support from an adult advisor, school club, student council, technology team, etc. i-SAFE also offers a wide range of online support for students who register (free of charge) at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org), including the i-MENTOR Training Network videos.

In this lesson, learners will be provided with reference materials to develop and broadcast public-service announcements to inform their peers about safe online social networking.

### Materials/Preparation

- online access to the i-SAFE assessments, if appropriate for this lesson
- copies of the activity pages for each student
- student registration in i-MENTOR program at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org)

### Pre-Assessment

If beginning the i-SAFE program with this lesson, administer the pre-assessment online at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org) by clicking on “Assessments” prior to the lesson. To verify school ID number, log in at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org), go to the “My Info” page, and select “Find Your School ID.”

### Lesson Procedures

*All students participating in the i-SAFE curriculum are considered i-MENTORS. If they haven't done so already, have students enroll online by clicking on “Create Account” at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org) to take full advantage of the support and incentives offered. This may be done at any time during the lessons, or students may complete this registration at home. If you would like to register your students yourself, simply go to <http://www.isafe.org/teachermentorprogram> and fill out the information for your students; then e-mail to [outreach@isafe.org](mailto:outreach@isafe.org). Your students will then be enrolled, will receive information about sharing Internet safety with other students, and will be registered to participate in contests to win prizes.*

### Discussion 1

- Review with students what the cyber community is.
  - Why is the Internet considered a community?
  - How is it similar to the physical community? How is it different?
  - What are benefits and dangers of this online community?

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## Peer-to-Peer Activity

Divide students into five equal groups known as “expert groups.”

- Expert Groups  
Have students meet in their “expert” groups: Each group will have a specific topic it will be responsible for becoming an expert on and reporting back to the class.
  - Group 1 – Online Community Definition
  - Group 2 – Community Communication
  - Group 3 – Community Benefits
  - Group 4 – Community Issues
  - Group 5 – Safer Online Communication
- The groups should read over their reference worksheet, discuss what they read in their expert groups, and answer the questions for discussion.
- Each expert group will be responsible for reporting back to the class on the information it has covered, as well as its answers to the questions for discussion.

## Class Activity

- Meet back as a class.
- The group “experts” should share what they have learned on their topic, as well as the answers to the discussion questions they brainstormed in their expert groups. In doing so, each member of the class is now responsible for all information learned.

## Peer-to-Peer Activity

Divide students back into small groups, and direct the students to engage in the following activity.

- Each group should receive a copy of the activity page “Online Community Review.”
- Each student should receive a copy of the activity page “Online Communities Pros and Cons.”
- Have each group review a different mock online community or review all. Students chart pros and cons, and list safety concerns.
- Proceed to Discussion 2.

## Discussion 2

Provide time for the student groups to present their evaluations, and discuss.

- As a class, discuss and agree on ratings for each online community that was reviewed, such as Very Safe, Safe, Questionable, Not Safe, and Dangerous.
- Once all online community examples are rated, rank as a class in order from most dangerous to least dangerous.

Once rankings are finished, discuss:

- Have any students have participated in communities that would probably be ranked as dangerous or that they might now consider dangerous?
- What are some items students should look for when deciding whether to join an online community?
- As a class, brainstorm a list of possible dangers for joining online communities (identity theft, cyber harassment, predators, etc.).

## Concluding Discussion

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As students have learned, online communities have both positive and negative effects on society. If not approached with safety in mind, online social networking can pose serious safety risks for users.

- Ask students why it is necessary to make this information about safety in online communities available to others in their peer group, parents, faculty, etc.
- Lead into a discussion about the enrichment activity.

## Enrichment Activity

Youth who participate in activities to share what they have learned about Internet safety are more likely to practice safe habits online.

Additional lessons and support for students, teachers, and parents on Internet safety topics are available from i-SAFE Inc. at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org).

Students will create a public-service announcement (PSA) to inform others about safe social networking. Student instructions (from enrichment activity handout):

### Your Goal

You will explore the safety issues involved in online social networking and develop a public-service announcement to educate others about how to use these sites safely.

The PSA can be audio, video, or live. Part of the project is locating a broadcast medium.

### Materials/Preparation

- background knowledge on Internet communities and online social networking
- computer with Internet access (recommended)
- materials of choice for developing PSA (video, audio, etc.)
- cooperation from school media outlet, radio, TV, or other broadcast medium

### Safety and Security in Online Social Networking

That's a pretty broad topic to cover. There are so many dangers and ways to prevent danger from happening. Take a minute and think about the following before you decide how to present your information.

- How can Internet safety PSAs be of service to others?
- What information do you consider "critical" when it comes to online social-networking communities.
- For whom is this information "critical"?
- How can you grab people's attention and make them listen to your important message?
- Based on what you know about the use of online social networking by your peers, what information will be most beneficial?

### Prepare.

1. Go to [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org), and review the celebrity PSAs.
2. Find a Media Outlet – Will it be at your school or in the larger community?
  - Brainstorm – Where can PSAs be played in your school or in your city? (Some possibilities include over the school PA system, at assemblies, over the radio, on a local news station, over the PA at a baseball game.) What new ones can you come up with?
3. Contact the media outlets to develop a cooperative agreement for broadcasting the PSAs.
  - Contact the media outlet before preparing your PSA to get its specific requirements regarding length, format, etc.
  - Be prepared on your topic so you can "sell" them on the idea over the phone.

### Develop and Deliver PSA.

1. Based upon media outlet, select media type (i.e. audio, video, or live).
2. Write the script that pertains to your topic and presentation style (i.e. audio, video, etc.).
3. Record the PSA (unless doing it live).

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4. Edit the PSA with original music and titles. (i-SAFE provides a free library of legal music and graphics at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org).)
  5. Provide PSA through the selected media outlet.
  6. Let i-SAFE know about your success. E-mail [outreach@isafe.org](mailto:outreach@isafe.org).

### **Post-Assessment**

Administer the post-assessment online at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org) by clicking on “Assessments” if this is your last lesson for i-SAFE. To verify school ID number, log in at [www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org), go to the “My Info” page, and select “Find Your School ID.”

### **Related Lessons**

The i-SAFE lessons on personal safety provide additional related information.

### **Contact us**

- We'd like to hear from you! E-mail [teachers@isafe.org](mailto:teachers@isafe.org) to share any unique ideas and/or experiences you had during implementation of this lesson.
- Students who participate in enrichment activities may be eligible for i-SAFE's monthly Most Valuable Mentor award. Let us know about deserving students.

## Expert Group: Online Community Definition

### Introduction

The Internet has resulted in new ways to communicate through the development of various types of “communities.” These “communities” transcend the physical and spatial boundaries that have traditionally defined community. Many teenagers spend hours each day surfing and interacting online in “cyber communities.” These communities can be attractive in that they seem custom fitted to participants’ interests, etc. In addition, pressure is off as one can become a persona, making his or her identity reflect whom they want to be more than whom they are. It is clear that online communities are changing the way people define themselves and how social networking occurs. These communities come with both benefits and dangers.

**Question:** How have online communication and online communities changed physical communication and physical communities?

### What is an Online Community?

Online communities can be broken down into four primary categories:

- Geographic – Participants share a common location or background location.
- Demographic – Participants share culture, race, religion, etc.
- Topical – Participants are brought together by binding topic (i.e. new baby, health or medical issue, favorite TV show, etc.).
- Activity-Based – Participants are brought together by an activity (i.e. a class, game, etc.).

In addition, participants share a reason for belonging, engage in repeated and active participation, share resources, and exchange information. And there is a shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols.

**Question:** Is a person who “lurks” or just watches the ongoings of an online community a member of that community? Why or why not?

## Expert Group: Communication in Online Communities

### Introduction

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### Communication in Online Communities:

How online communities are structured can vary widely. The following are some common ways communities online can “communicate”:

- E-mail Distribution: Usually based on a specific subject, in these groups participants e-mail and respond to e-mails.
- Blogging: Blogs are Web journals posted online for others to read and comment on.
- Message Boards/Newsgroups: These types of groups use a forum or bulletin board format in which members can leave messages and view responses at a later time via a Web site.
- Instant Messaging: These consist of buddy lists and instant messaging (IM) circles.
- Chat rooms: These online groups have instant communication like IM but are in a group atmosphere.
- Online Social-Networking Web Sites: These Web sites provide the means for individuals to post personal information in interactive web page formats. Some are illegal for participants younger than 14.
- Cell-Phone Socializing: Access to social-networking Web sites is now being made available via cell phones.

**Question:** What types of online communities have you participated in or observed? What was unique about each one?

## Expert Group: Benefits of Online Communities

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**Question:** How have online communication and online communities changed physical communication and physical communities?

### Online Community Benefits

Online communities can have numerous benefits, from allowing one to connect with others across all boundaries to allowing one to find a niche group for support. For example: If one finds out he or she has a disease like leukemia, an online group can be found specific to the disease and even further compartmentalized by age, region, etc. Participants can receive treatment information, resources, and support. Other communities offer the ability for people interested in special topics to network with others and share information.

Online communities break down barriers, such as race, gender, income, and distance, that restrict people in physical communities.

**Question:** Brainstorm a list of 10 possible benefits of online communities.

## Expert Group: Common Issues in Online Communities

### Introduction

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**Question:** How have online communication and online communities changed physical communication and physical communities?

### Common Issues of Online Communities

Many issues that arise in online communities do so because of several basic tenants of interaction in online communities.

1. Online communities require you to provide personal information: When you register for an online community, whether an e-mail list or a chat group, you are required to fill in certain basic pieces of personal information. The most basic include a user name, e-mail address, and password. However, more information is typically imparted as you interact in the community.
2. Profiles: Most online communities request or even demand a profile. This profile contains personal information that is then available for not just other members but any others who care to search.
3. Scams: By participating in an online community, you are building a level of trust. You tend to reveal information, etc. Participation in such a community opens one up to scams and spam.
4. Permanent record of comments: Comments online are, in essence, permanently recorded. Despite the casual and familiar feel of some communities, that same information, such as kids’ names, workplace, vacation time, etc., is also being revealed to others. Also, information on health, money, etc., can be reviewed weeks, months, even years later by others.

**Question:** How can these issues result in serious problems for online community participants?

## Expert Group: Safe Online Communication

### Introduction

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**Question:** How have online communication and online communities changed physical communication and physical communities?

### Issue Prevention

Choose the type of online community you participate in carefully. Find out about safety options, such as the following:

- Privacy Policies – How will information collected be used?
- User Guidelines – Is there a code of conduct? Penalties for violators?
- Password Protection – Does service require a password? Pick a difficult one to decrypt. Are there security questions to identify you when you forget your password?
- E-mail Address Hiding – Are there options to hide your e-mail address or only display a portion? Can others contact you without directly revealing your e-mail address?

**What are the site’s default settings?** Many sites show a lot of personal profile information as the default. You can turn these settings off and limit strangers from viewing all of your information by limiting access to your space to people you actually know.

**Some sites have special privacy features depending on user age.**

**Remember, though, that having a private profile doesn't make you invisible.** Other users can still search and find you by name or e-mail address. Most users of online communities can take other measures to protect themselves, including:

- Anonymous Post Blocking – This feature on blogging sites allows one to block anonymous posts to the blog (i.e. one cannot remain anonymous in order to post mean messages).
- Filtering Options – Another feature on blogging sites, this allows one to set who can see posted messages.
- IP Address Logging – This feature on blogging sites allows one to track each computer that posts comments on your blog.
- Private Communities – One can set up private communities, which allows one to moderate and approve who joins, writes, or receives messages.
- Alternate E-Mail Addresses – Choose a free e-mail or alternate e-mail address for community subscriptions to minimize spam and scams.
- E-Mail Address Masking – When you do post in communities, mask your address from e-mail harvesters by inserting a word or phrase into it.

**Question:** How can safer online communities be built?

# Online Community Review

The following are “mock” (not real) online communities, but all of the features listed are found on real websites.

## Community for review: Yourspaces

Common features: Able to sign up and fill out a profile with name, age, gender, location, school, etc., as well as person likes and dislikes. Can search for others based on particular elements of the profile. Pictures can be uploaded as well as digital media such as music and videos. Users can maintain a blog entry and completely customize the look of the space. Users can invite others and add them to a friend network.

Rules: No one 13 and under, nothing overtly explicit, material is reviewed

Questions: Are you familiar with this type of community? Do you know friends who have joined one similar to it? Have you ever browsed one like it?

## Community for review: Scandalsinmyschool

Common Features: Must register but can then browse by school name and location to find bulletin boards to post on. Boards are most commonly used to cyber bully or call people out. Language can be very inappropriate and messages harsh.

Rules: Not many!

Questions: Does this community provide benefits to the citizens of Cyberspace? Why would people join?

## Community for review: Teen Advice

Common Features: Comprehensive site dedicated towards teenagers and their issues. Teens can browse articles, interact, post questions on forums, etc. Questions are answered by experts who get their advice by surveying students and compiling answers in an appropriate format. One can find questions on issues such as prom night, substance abuse, dating, and more.

Rules: Forums are NOT moderated although they review the right to pull material. There are community guides to answer questions, etc. One must register to post.

Questions: How can this type of community be both positive and negative? Have you ever participated in this or a similar type community?

## **Community for review: CyberTeens**

Common features: This site is built specifically for teens and monitored by teens (and adults). Strict guidelines for forum postings are followed and messages are reviewed. No hateful, obscene, etc. messages are allowed. Different forum topics include ruminations, networking, technology, animals and pets, etc. There is also a chat option.

Rules: No obscenity, hateful language, etc. All messages reviewed by forum hosts.

Questions: Are moderated forums safer and beneficial? Would you participate in a monitored community?

## **Community for review: 18andyounger**

Common Features: This site can only be used by those under 18. No pictures or profiles are allowed at all. Youth can post messages, chat, etc. Site is routinely screened for inappropriate material, language, etc. Postings are up beat and dealing with everyday life. Instant messaging is also an option.

Rules: Must be under 18 to post, no profile, no bad language, no personal info, etc.

Questions: How can the rules and set-up of this site promote safety? Would you participate in this type of community? Why or why not?

## **Community for Review: Grabber**

Common Features: This is a peer to peer network that allows one to search for and download music, movies, software, and more. Chat and Instant messaging are also enabled. Material up for download is not reviewed for validity (i.e. it may provide illegal (copyrighted) as well as illegal materials; material may not be what it is listed as – could contain malicious code, etc.)

Rules: Must download software package which contains adware. Disabling the adware disables program. Users must provide a name and files to share with others.

Questions: How does this type community work? What are the advantages to peer to peer networks? Disadvantages? Safety and security risks?

## Pros and Cons Chart

**Directions:** Based upon the online community information you receive, list the pros and cons of the community. Then write a few safety concerns you have based on this information. Finally, rate the community.

Pros	Cons

### Safety Concerns:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Ranking:

Very Safe    Safe    Questionable    Not Safe    Dangerous

# ***Public-Service Announcements (PSAs)***

***Grab people's attention and educate them at the same time!***

## **Your Goal**

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The PSA can be audio, video, or live. Part of the project is locating a broadcast medium.

## **Materials/Preparation**

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