Parents' guide to Twitter

How does Twitter work?

With over 500 million users, Twitter is the world's most popular micro-blogging service. Even if you don't use Twitter yourself, it is important for parents to understand how social network sites work, so that you can help your child to stay safe. Twitter allows users to publish "tweets", which are text-based updates of up to 140 characters. These can be seen by other users and the world at large. Twitter can be accessed online through a computer, or via smartphone and tablet apps.
Twitter users create a personal profile with a name, a Twitter handle (denoted by the @symbol), and a short biography.

Once you've set up a profile, you can then choose to 'follow' other users. This means that their tweets will appear in your timeline. The more users you follow, the more tweets you will see. Likewise, other users can also choose to follow you, meaning all your tweets will appear in their timeline.

Unlike other social networks, there is no mutual 'friendship' link. Under the default settings, your profile is public, and anyone can follow you. People can also look at your tweets by going to your profile page. It is therefore very important to remember that tweets are public, and you should be careful about what you choose to post.

That said, Twitter can be great fun for sharing little updates or interesting links or news stories, and for keeping up with friends. The following privacy tips will help you and your child to use Twitter as safely as possible.

How to limit a Twitter profile

It's important to be aware of what is public and what is not on Twitter. You may feel like your tweets can only be seen by those who follow you but, as we've already seen, a public profile can be seen by anyone in the world – and that includes your teachers, your grandparents and the police. Even if you reply to a user with their Twitter handle, the message is still public.

It is possible to PROTECT your tweets, which will remove your profile from the public domain, so that your tweets can only be seen by your followers. Followers will have to request to follow you and will

only see your tweets if you approve them. This allows you to make Twitter a more confidential place between you and your friends.

To protect your tweets, log into Twitter, and select 'Settings' from the profile menu. Scroll down to find 'Tweet privacy' and tick the checkbox next to 'Protect my tweets'.

Twitter and your location

Like many social networks, Twitter allows you to publish your location each time you tweet. This might seem like a fun idea to let your followers know where you are, but it can also allow people you don't know to find out where you are, particularly when Tweeting from a mobile device on a public profile. It is strongly recommended not to use the location feature on Twitter.

Location settings are turned off as a default, but it's worth double checking. If you have turned yours on and want to turn them off again, go into the 'Settings' menu, scroll down to 'Tweet location' and untick the checkbox that says 'Add a location to my tweets'. At this point, it's also worth pressing the button that says 'Delete all location data', to clear information about where you've been in the past.

Blocking and reporting Twitter users

If you are followed (or, in the case of a protected profile, you get a follow request) from someone you don't like the look of, it's possible to block these users.

Next to the 'Follow' button on a user's profile is an icon shaped like a person's head and shoulders. Click on this and a menu will appear. You now have a few options. You can BLOCK the user to prevent them from seeing your profile, and vice versa, and you can also REPORT FOR SPAM, which will alert Twitter to any users who are abusing the service.

If you are concerned about offensive material or pictures involving children or young people, you can report these to CEOP, the **Child Exploitation and Online Protection** unit of the police. CEOP was set up specifically to deal with child protection issues online. Please note CEOP is not able to get involved in cyber bullying incidents, only about the concerns of the safety of young people online.