



www.stopcyberbullying.org

Google yourself!

No, we haven't changed our policy on using inappropriate language. Google is the search engine and information gathering phenomenon that collects bits and pieces of information available online. Our kids have dubbed searching for yourself or others you have met, or want to meet, online as "Googling" someone.

As more and more of us are using the Internet to communicate and share our ideas, more and more of our personal information is posted online. Perhaps it's a profile you put up years ago that still exists. Maybe you signed up for a free messaging service online and didn't check the privacy box when the registration application was completed. On a bad day, you may have criticized your boss or your spouse or significant other. Had you checked Web sites for mortgage information or looked for a new home? Did you register at a Web site or post in a public forum? Have your kids? What are they sharing online with Web sites and in public with strangers? It's time you found out for sure.

The ramifications of having your personal information posted online can be very serious. Just think about it. Is your telephone number listed in the United States and have you ever given it out online? If so, anyone who wants to can find out where you live and get a map to your front door. This holds true for your children as well. Even though laws exist in the United States to prevent Web site from knowingly collecting information from our preteens, they have learned how to get around the law by saying they are thirteen or fourteen, or twenty-seven. Who knows what they have given away online? As parents, we better know! And with identity theft growing by the minute, we need to guard our personal information carefully, online and off. Finally, at least one person was killed by a stalker who broadcast his intentions online, in advance of the murder. Had someone sought out her personal information postings online and known about the threat, her life might have been saved.

Okay, now you are convinced. You are ready to "Google" yourself and your family members (and perhaps your boyfriend or girlfriend or boss, and that neighbor you aren't crazy about). What do you do?

First you go to Google at <http://www.google.com/>. Type in your full name, but in quotes – like this "Parry Aftab." Then click Google search. All the references to you, or someone else with the same name will come up. Search for your e-mail address or IM screen name as well (making sure to include the full e-mail address, such as Parry@Aftab.com, or ParryAftab@aol.com, not just the section before the "@" sign). Do the same with your nick name, and then your telephone numbers, mobile numbers and street address, remembering to keep the quotation marks around anything you need to find in one phrase, exactly as you typed it. Otherwise, the search engine will pick up every reference to "Parry" and to "Aftab" on the Web. Now Google your kids and their telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and IM screen names as well. (You may have to check with them for all their screen names and e-mail addresses.)

Next, you need to search for newsgroup postings about you or your loved ones. You can do that by clicking on "groups" above the search screen on Google. Newsgroups are part of the Internet, but separate from the Web. They are much older than the Web-friendly clickable content and where more aggressive and heated communications are often posted. (Note that getting anything removed from a newsgroup, is almost impossible unless there is a direct threat to your safety, or a child is involved. Even then, it is very difficult.)

Repeat the search, with your name in quotes, for images as well. This shows all images which are associated with your name online. The search selections of "news" and "directories" may not apply to people who are not public figures at some level. But it never hurts to search and see if you are mentioned.

If you find that your personal contact information appears when you don't want it to appear, you can ask Google to disable the information. You would also need to reach out to the site or online service and ask for it to be removed from wherever it's posted. It sounds a lot easier than it really is, though. Some sites don't care about what is posted there, even if their terms of service prohibit certain personal information from being posted or used to harass someone. But finding a terms of service violation (TOS violation) is a good place to start. To check out whether the posting is a TOS violation, review the terms of service for the site or service. Does it prohibit the posting of any personal information of others without their permission? Does it prohibit posting of any personal information or inaccurate information? What about prohibiting posting of information intended to harass or embarrass someone or that might affect their safety or well-being? Sometimes the terms of service has a catch-all prohibition that can be used to remove anything the hosting company deems inappropriate. If you approach it from a safety and privacy perspective, this may be sufficient to convince them to remove the information. If all else fails, every terms of service has a prohibition against criminal or illegal activities. Depending on what information is being posted, you may be able to rely on that provision and a broad claim of "privacy law" violations to get some help.

Often it is difficult finding the right person to contact. You can start with the webmaster, and can usually find them at `webmaster@[the Web site name/URL]`. For example, contacting our webmaster by e-mail would be `webmaster@wiredsafety.org`. There may also be a privacy contact at the site, or a DMCA contact (that's a law that covers copyright violations and usually has someone watching those e-mails carefully). Your e-mail should include the URL of the page that includes your personal information. (The easiest way to do this without typos is to block and copy the URL from your browser itself into the e-mail.) It should also include the exact information you want removed, and a statement that you are that person. Copy and paste the information from the site directly into the e-mail. And address the e-mail to yourself as well, so you have a record of what you sent, when you sent it and to whom.

If you don't hear back within a week, send a follow-up and include all of the information you had previously sent, as well as the date the earlier e-mail had been sent. If you still haven't heard back within another week, e-mail `privacy@wiredsafety.org`.

If your children's information is posted online, and they are under the age of thirteen, notify the Web site or online service that your children are under thirteen and that COPPA (the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) requires that they remove the information immediately. If they don't respond right away, contact `privacy@wiredsafety.org` or the FTC directly, at <http://www.ftc.gov/>. While there is no law requiring a Web site to generally remove your personal information (absent a privacy policy at the site that promises to do so, a legal requirement or a TOS violation discussed above), COPPA is very carefully enforced and the Web site MUST remove your child's information. They may require that you prove you are the parent, but otherwise have no option but to remove the information, immediately.

But what if you have posted information about yourself, or others have done so for you, and it's not accurate? You don't mind that it's posted, but you do mind that it's not correct? That may be easier or harder to have corrected than having it removed entirely. Try using the same methods we suggested for having information removed, but also include the correct information in the e-mail. Sometimes it is easier to just have the information removed entirely, and repost it correctly. For some reason, the two-step process of both removing the old information and adding the updated and correct information is more than many Web sites can handle.

If you find a site that is designed to harass you or target you or your children for sexual solicitations or harassment, you need to get help immediately. Cyberstalkers and harassers often use the Internet to post sexual want ads for people they want to harm and frighten, and even the children of those they want to harm. The middle of the night hang-ups can sometimes be explained when you find a site like this, or a posting in a newsgroup making outrageous offers on your behalf. Law enforcement should be

involved, if there is any link to real offline contact information. Contact your local law enforcement agency first. (Law enforcement can get help directly from WiredSafety's law enforcement division, CyberLawEnforcement.org.) If they can't help you, reach out to WiredSafety.org (the world's largest online safety and help organization) and they will help you get law enforcement involved and teach you what to do in the meantime.

It's your privacy. Protect it!