

Cybersafety



**BE
AWARE OF
WHAT YOUR CHILD
IS DOING
ONLINE**

Remember when you had that tattered leather diary with the little lock and key? You could find a clever hiding place for it in your room...someplace where no one would read it and invade your privacy.

Things are a little different for today's preteens and teens. In fact, many children are posting their innermost thoughts right on the Internet on such social networking Web sites as MySpace.com and Xanga.com. As a parent, you'll want to be aware of these sites. Even though students are blocked from accessing them on school district computers, they can still get to the sites from other computers with Internet access.

The Web sites give users the opportunity to post profiles about themselves (name, hometown, likes, dislikes, relationship details, even sexual preferences), along with online, interactive journals known as "blogs." While the majority of the content centers on innocent conversations about homework, crushes, college prospects and music, there may be some disturbing information, as well.

A local father recently went online to MySpace.com after hearing relatives talking about the fact that their child had posted risqué photos and commentary. He was appalled to find that his 17-year-old daughter had posted a profile of herself that included vulgar and provocative language, along with references to alcohol and drug use. While he was sure she was exaggerating her behavior and descriptions to gain popularity, the information, along with her photo, was on the Internet for anyone to see.

"I was able to figure out her log-in name and password and I immediately took the information down and had a serious discussion with her about what's acceptable to post on Web sites,"

the father comments. "I don't think kids realize how many people can access the sites and what the potential dangers are."

While this father had enough technical savvy to check up on his daughter, many parents don't even know such sites exist. They find out when rumors start or when seeing news stories about children who are harmed as a result of their Internet interactions. According to a recent CBS News story, at least two murders are being investigated that have possible connections to MySpace.com. In Texas, Connecticut and New York, sexual predators have been arrested after assaulting girls they met in person after online interactions on MySpace.com. These occurrences may not be the norm, but there's still good reason to check into your child's online activities. For example, many Capital Region school officials have found that content posted on blogs could be considered "cyberbullying" and contributed to arguments and fights on and off school property.

Not all negative, but caution advised

From a social and developmental perspective, Internet chatting and blogs can play a positive role by offering teens a place to share their ideas, stories and

feelings. But, there can be negative effects, as well. With that being the case, Internet safety experts and law enforcement officers advise parents to check up on their children's online activity.

"I sit down with my daughter and we look at her MySpace site together," says one district mother. "She doesn't have any objectionable material or personal details on the site, which is good. I did notice, however, that one of her friends used my daughter's full name when they responded to her posting. I asked my daughter to remove the reference in order to keep the site anonymous."

The teen was agreeable and understood the importance of not revealing personal details. "For safety reasons, I only use first names and never list my hometown, zip code or school," the 16-year old comments. "And I don't communicate with anyone I don't know. I just use the site as a means of communicating with my friends. It's a social thing."

She revealed, though, that a 30-year-old man tried to establish contact with her. She used a MySpace safety option that allows participants to only accept contact with people they put on a friends or buddy list.

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Popular social networking & blog sites

These popular Web sites have different ways of logging in and checking postings. All have a search feature, where you can type in key words to find different postings.

- ▶ <http://www.facebook.com>
- ▶ <http://www.friendster.com>
- ▶ <http://www.livejournal.com>
- ▶ <http://www.myspace.com>
- ▶ <http://www.webshots.com>
- ▶ <http://www.xanga.com>

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Another 16-year-old uses MySpace for social interaction, too. She's like many teens, though, who responded to a national survey on Internet use, saying she understands the possible dangers involved in Internet chatting, but wouldn't necessarily tell her parents if she received inappropriate contacts. "If the contact kept happening over and over, I might tell them," she comments. "But I think they trust me to do the right thing."

Tips for parents

- ◆ Just as you speak with your children about not talking to strangers, emphasize the same point when speaking about staying safe on the Internet. Make sure they know that people can easily misrepresent themselves online (i.e., the 15-year-old who lives in Colonie and wants to meet at the mall could easily be a 48-year-old sexual predator).
- ◆ Talk to kids about the dangers of moving from the virtual world of the computer to the real world. Tell them about their peers who were assaulted when they met personally with people they connected with online.
- ◆ Use the issues surrounding blogs and social networking sites as an opportunity to form a partnership with your children. Kids can teach you about the technology if you're not skilled in this area, while you can teach your children about Internet street smarts.
- ◆ Set up your own site on MySpace.com and other similar sites and monitor what your children and their friends are talking about. Ask to see your children's profiles and sites to ensure no personal details are posted that would identify your children (name, town, phone number, contact information, information about family members or friends). Similarly, check out the sites posted by your children's friends; be sure they are not posting revealing details about your children, such as full names, screen names, e-mail addresses, phone numbers or when and where they're getting together.

- ◆ Check photos posted for details that could indicate a child's identity or location. For example, if your children are wearing school district sweatshirts (or even job uniforms), predators have an indication where to find them.
- ◆ Be sure your children know that anyone can see the material they post...not just their friends. Instruct them not to post anything they wouldn't want the world to know. For example, ask would your children want a teacher or college recruiter to know that they cheated on a test? Yes, college recruiters are now checking blogs and other social networking sites, as are potential employers and teachers.

- ◆ If you feel you can't trust your child to refrain from posting potentially dangerous information, restrict computer usage by using blocking/filtering software or by moving the computer to a public area in your home so you can monitor usage. Be aware, though, that children will likely have computer access at friends' homes.



Check out

the following Web sites regularly to keep up with Internet trends and online safety issues:

- http://www.safekids.com/child_safety.htm
- <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm>
- <http://www.wiredsafety.com>
- <http://www.safekids.com>
- <http://www.wiredwithwisdom.org>
- <http://www.safeteens.com>
- <http://www.projectsafekids.org>
- <http://netfamilynews.org>
- <http://www.blogsafety.com>
- <http://www.missingkids.com>
- <http://www.nbc.com>
- <http://www.filterreview.com>
- <http://www.msnbc.com>

Internet terms

- ◆ **Blocking software:** Computer programs that filter content from the Internet and block access to some Web sites or content based on specific criteria. Parents can use blocking software to prevent access to certain Web sites and other information available over the Internet. Client-based filters and filtering software work in a similar fashion.
- ◆ **Blog/Weblog:** An online diary or personal chronological log of thoughts or commentaries published on a Web page.
- ◆ **Buddy list/friends:** A collection of screen names in an Instant Messaging (IM) program or blog site. When you add people to your buddy list or you add "friends," you can see when they are online and they can see when you're online, making instant messaging possible.
- ◆ **Chat/Chat Room:** A feature offered by many online services or Web sites that allows participants to "chat" by typing messages that are displayed almost instantly on the screens of other participants who are using the same chat rooms. Generally, the participants remain anonymous by using nicknames or pseudonyms to identify themselves online. Chat rooms are places or pages in a Web site or in an online service where people can "chat" with each other by typing messages. Chat rooms may have specific themes or interests — for example, teen issues, movies, television shows, exercise, etc. Computer users can also go to chat rooms that focus on content (suicide, sex, pedophilia, drug use) you may not want your children accessing.
- ◆ **IM or Instant Message:** Technology similar to that of chat rooms; notifies a user when a friend is online, allowing them to "converse" by exchanging text messages. IM is offered by commercial online services or works through specific Web sites; the latter is called Web-based instant-messaging or web-based chat.

(Source: www.getnetwise.org and getbestinfo.com)