

In today's society communication seems to be best handled by kids and their peer groups through the electronic medium via the internet, instant messaging and teen blogs (a web based conversation where many can contribute that can contain daily musings that are important to the lives of teens). While this seems to be a fun and fast convenient form of communication there can be many dangers that come along with it that many teenagers don't understand.

Many parents are not aware of their teen's internet use and should take steps to become more versed in the internet lingo and activities their children participate in. There have been some parents in the district who have found that their children have sites on such places as myspace.com, paxed.com, facebook.com, and others. As you may have heard in the news and will read below, these sites can pose some serious risk due to their naivety. Even if you think your child doesn't have one, you may want to ask and investigate. Too much personal information can be posted on these sites that may leave your child vulnerable and at risk.

Parry Aftab, Internet Privacy and Security Lawyer and founder of WiredSafety.org has created a website that can answer any question you might have about safety and these types of social sites your child might be accessing. Below you will find some information available on that site that will help to educate you in understanding what these sites are, and help you make some more informed decisions about your child's ability to access these sites in your home. Aftab also gives internet safety tip recommendations which have also been included that can help as a parent feel more secure about your child's use of the computer in your home.

Blog Sites, Profile Sites, Diary Sites or Social-Networking Sites

By Parry Aftab

Everyone calls them a different name, but it's where kids are flocking (adults are too). They are a combination of a diary, a personal ad and a cyberdating Web site. I often call them a public diary on steroids. Recently, I have been receiving a large number of inquiries from schools, parents, regulators and the media about social-networking Web sites.

WiredSafety and MySpace.com

I decided that it was important to address parent concerns and answer their questions. In connection with this we have agreed to provide our safety content and help to the largest and most popular of these sites, MySpace.com.

I did this because they cared more than the other sites I contacted. When I explained the problems parents were reporting and we had spotted, they asked for help in improving safety at the site and building a section for parents' questions. That's what we do. We help everyone surf more safely. And MySpace.com is helping us do that.

MySpace.com and other similar sites are designed to allow people to share their creativity, pictures, and information with others. Sometimes people do this to find romance. Sometimes they do it to find friends with similar interest. While this may be okay for adults, it is not okay for kids.

MySpace.com recognizes this, and prohibits anyone under 14 years of age from using their website. Unfortunately, while they may set rules to keep younger kids off the site, they can't prevent kids from lying about their age, pretending to be 14 years of age or older. To address this, MySpace.com has developed special software to review the profiles of their members, to try and find anyone under age, based on information the members post about themselves. It's not perfect, but it does help spot the underage members.

While MySpace.com is doing its best to keep your children from using their website and lying about their age, it's up to parents to do their job too. Parents need to talk with their children about not sharing personal information online. Personal information includes pictures, names and addresses, schools they attend, cell and phone numbers and many other less obvious things, such as the name of their school team, ethnic background and even a mall near your house. (You can learn more about how to talk to your kids and what you should be asking at WiredKids.org or WiredSafety.org. I am an Internet privacy and security lawyer and founded the all-volunteer Wired Safety Group. We can help you if things go wrong online, or you just have questions. We provide information, education and one-to-one help for victims of cyberabuse.)

We at WiredSafety.org are developing a special program just for parents concerned about their kids using social-networking and online dating sites. It will teach you what you need to know about finding out if your child has a profile on one of these sites, how to review them and remove them, if you want to. It will also help you if your child is being cyberbullied using one of these sites or members from these sites, or is cyberbullying others.

So what do you, as a parent, do? First you need to find out if your child has a page on one of these sites. The best way to find out if your child has a profile on this or another similar site is to ask them. If you're not sure that your child is being honest with you, you can search MySpace.com (or the other sites) using their e-mail address, or by searching for their school. (You click on "search" and enter their email address or full name in the appropriate search box.)

If you find that your child has a profile on the Web site, you should review it. It's amazing how much you can learn about your child by reading their profiles. Does it contain personal information, such as their full name, address or phone numbers? Has your child posted photos? Are they photos of themselves or someone else? Are they sharing poems they write or provocative comments about themselves or others?

If you want the profile removed (you must remove your child's profile if they are under age), first ask your child to remove it themselves. If that doesn't work, MySpace.com has

a section explaining how to remove a page. If you find someone who is underage, you can report it there as well. It's not as easy a procedure as the other Web sites.

While MySpace.com is working hard to keep kids off their Web site, ultimately, protecting your child is your job. But you have lots of help. At WiredKids.org and WiredSafety.org thousands of volunteers donate their time to helping parents and children surf responsibly and safely. And we will be building a few tutorials help parents and their children understand how to be careful when communicating publicly online.

A good thing to do is to ask your kids why they created the profile. You might learn that they wanted to share their thoughts with others, make new friends or even allow others in their school to get to know them better. But not all of their motives are as noble or safe. Some may be interested in meeting new romantic interests or role-playing inappropriately online. And when a young preteen lies about their age posing as a seventeen year old at the site, that can be a serious problem. Others in their late teens might approach your child thinking they were older. That's bad for everyone.

If you discover that your child is posting provocative comments or inappropriate images online, it's time for the tough talk. The one about stranger dangers and how that cute fourteen year old boy they meet online may not be cute, may not be fourteen and may not be a boy. (Parents of young boys need to understand that their children are equally at risk. About one-third of the cases of Internet sexual exploitation are men exploiting boys.) Our children need to realize that there are real risks relating to meeting strangers offline, including murder.

The first confirmed murder victim by an Internet sexual predator was thirteen when she died, three years ago May 2002. The risks are real, not matter how smart, sophisticated or tech savvy your kids are. We recommend the book, *A Girl's Life Online*, by Katie Tarbox. We are also developing a few videos for teens teaching them about standard ploys used by Internet sexual predators to lure a young boy or girl into an offline meeting or sexual exploitation situations online.

It's not easy raising children anymore. It is even harder when the parent is expected to be expert in Internet, cell phone and interactive game risks. The good thing is that you're not facing these challenges alone. We're here to help.

Just remember that while your kids may know more than you do about technology, you know more about life. And you are allowed to set the rules and enforce them. You're still the parent! There is software you can install that will record what your kids say and post online. There is even one that will e-mail you reports at work. The ones I like best are made by Spectorsoft, and can be found at software4parents.com or spectorsoft.com. But don't use them just to spy on your kids. Treat them like a security video camera in the corner of a bank. No one views the tapes unless and until there is a break-in. Do the same here. Check the program reports if something goes wrong. It will collect whatever you need for evidence and to help your child if something goes wrong.

Also, check your parental control programs. Many, such as AOL's and MSN's, can block access to social-networking Web sites, or other sites you think are inappropriate for your younger child. There are many other products you can purchase to block sites as well. (Check out software4parents.com to learn about and purchase some of these.) Just remember that the best filter is the one between your children's ears.

If your child is being bullied by another child online, check the terms of service first. If the bullying violates the Web site's terms of service, report it to TOS and the offending comments and/or profile will be removed. If something serious occurs and you need to reach out to law enforcement, let them know that WiredSafety.org is here to help them, if they need it. Cyberbullying is a growing problem. You can learn more about it, as well as how to prevent and handle cyberbullying incidents, at our StopCyberbullying.org and InternetSuperheroes.org. We also have a report line link for victims of cyberbullying, their schools and parents where specially-trained volunteers assist victims of cyberstalking, harassment and cyberbullying without charge.

If schools are looking for a presentation or program to address their students' posting inappropriate profiles or using these Web sites, while underage or other parent concerns, they should visit WiredKids.org or Teenangels.org. Schools may find many of their students using a particular Web site. If the students are under 13, please notify MySpace.com's help staff and their profiles will be removed immediately. Working together with schools and parents, we may be able to keep our kids off of Web sites that are inappropriate for young children and teach them to make good choices online and offline.

Online Safety Resources for Parents taken from wiredsafety.org

We've talked a lot about the dangers and how the law is working to combat these risks, but what can parents do? A lot. The following is a Guideline for parents to address many of the problems we've talked about.

Online Safety Guidelines for Parents

1. Personal information stays personal. While this is an important rule for children it's also an important rule for parents. Giving information on your family and your children to the wrong person could be dangerous.
2. Make sure your child doesn't spend all of his or her time on the computer.
3. People, not computers, should be their best friends and companions.
4. Keep the computer in a family room, kitchen or living room, not in your child's bedroom. This way parents can monitor what is happening when the child is online. Knowing you are watching, kids are less likely to put themselves in risky situations and you can safely oversee what's going on.
5. Learn enough about computers so you can enjoy them together with your kids.
6. Watch your children when they're online and see where they go.
7. Make sure that your children feel comfortable coming to you with questions. This should apply to all situations including the computer. If your children feel they can trust you they are more likely to come to you with tough problems and questions.

8. Keep kids out of chatrooms or IRC's unless they are monitored.
9. Encourage discussions between you and your child about what they enjoy online. This way you can direct your children to safe sites that fit in with their interests and it helps our children like we want an active role in their lives.
10. Discuss these rules, get your children to agree to adhere to them, and post them near the computer as a reminder.
11. Help them find a balance between computing and other activities.
12. Remember to monitor their compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your children spend on the computer.
13. Get to know their "online friends" just as you get to know all of their other friends.
14. Warn them that people may not be what they seem to be. I can say I'm a 12 year old boy named Billy but I'm not. The Internet provides a cover for people to put on whatever persona's they desire. Predators often pose as children to gain our children's trust.

Protecting your children when they're not home

Make sure you and the parents of your children's friends agree about monitoring the children's activities online, and that you use similar tools to enforce your choices. If not, circumventing your parental controls is as simple as your children walking next door and computing at a friend's house. If you can't agree on a joint policy, make sure the other parents honor your wishes and keep your children off their computer while visiting.

Follow responsible safety practice yourself

1. Install spyware and adaware blocking software on your computer.
2. Make sure you have a working firewall
3. Install anti-virus software and update it regularly
4. Take advantage of spam-blocking tools offered by your Internet provider or e-mail software
5. Use filtering or parental control technologies. Block everything that isn't pre-approved, rather than just filtering out the "bad" sites.
6. Think about whether your children really need e-mail or IM, and if you determine they do: block all communications from anyone other than pre-approved senders and make sure their buddy list is no longer than the age of the child and that you know (in real life) everyone on it.
7. Bookmark their favorite Web sites so that they won't mistype them and end up at a "bad" site
8. Limit their online time to no more than ½ hour a day, unless they have a special project for school
9. Tell them to get your permission before posting any content, including profiles and blogs, to a Web site or sending it via e-mail or IM
10. Look for safe site lists you can trust. Check out WiredKids.org's approved safe sites list.