

MySPACE.WHAT?

by
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The impetus for this article was a phone call from a colleague at the Special Investigative Unit (SIU) regarding the numerous calls he has received about safety issues at MySpace.com. The website was created in 2003 and the original users were musicians who used it as an opportunity to share music and information on concerts. Recently, the Rupert Murdoch News Corporation bought MySpace.com for 580 million dollars. According to one source, there are over 63 million people who belong to MySpace.com, with over two million individuals joining the website within a two week period in February 2006. Similar websites also popular with teens are Xanga.com, Facebook, Alldumb.com, Rotten.com, LiveJournal.com, and FaceParty.

MySpace.com is a social networking website. Teens use it to “virtually” meet their peers by exchanging messages via their personal webpages. In order to join, users must provide an email address. Signing up for a membership takes about two minutes. According to some reports, the majority of users on MySpace are between the ages of 14 to 24 years old. The age requirement to join is 14, but apparently many youth who are younger than the required age join by providing an older age. There is no verification of membership information. However, the website does monitor and delete underage profiles (over 250,000 to date). Frequently, teens put personal information (e.g., name, address, phone number, school, best physical feature, birthplace, sexual orientation, place of employment, parent’s names, etc.) on their webpage. Many of the profiles also contain photos. Teens share their photos, music, and “instant message” each other on the website.

Teens today (“netizens” as they refer to themselves) are the first generation to grow up online. A natural extension of this is a website for teens to meet other teens. On the positive side, the website may help teens develop their communication skills and enhance their self-esteem. Sounds great, right? Not necessarily. The dilemma is that the internet has become a playground for sexual predators. According to some reports, one out of every five children online is propositioned. There have been numerous reports of teens being sexually assaulted as a result of meeting individuals they have communicated with through the internet. A survey by I-Safe America reported that 42% of students (between 4th and 8th grade) said that they had been bullied online. In another survey of 500 teens (ages 14 to 18) by the Intelligence Group, 29% of the teens said they had had a scary experience online. One of the concerns is that teens are posting very personal information on the website and predators are using this information to entice them into unsafe situations. Individuals can target certain groups on the website by requesting specific criteria. For example, an individual can type in specific criteria that he or she is looking for (e.g., gender, age, relationship status, etc.) and the website will give you all of the members that fit those criteria. Sexual assault is not the only concern many adults have voiced about the use of MySpace.com. Other potential risks include harassment, bullying, viruses, hackers, legal and financial issues (e.g., identity theft). These problems are not unique to MySpace.com, rather they are caused by individuals using the internet as a tool to take advantage of others. In fact, MySpace.com promotes responsible behavior and has an exceptional user agreement

that tries to forbid inappropriate behavior. The site provides safety information regarding internet use and has partnered with WiredSafety.org.

Certainly, with the use of websites such as MySpace.com, the rules of etiquette have changed. Although most teens would not talk to a complete stranger on the street, many would talk to a stranger online. Sixty-nine percent of 13 to 14 year olds reported that they did not know who they were communicating with online. Teens frequently feel as though they know the person online (with the assumption that the individual is another teen). MySpace tries to monitor the postings, with one third of their employees (n=90) monitoring (which includes reviewing all of the images that are posted) the website twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. However, we must also take some responsibility for ensuring the safety of our children.

The following is a compilation of suggestions offered by several websites regarding safety issues:

- First and foremost, keep the lines of communication open with your teen (and pre-teen). Let your teen know that he or she can share with you their cyberspace adventures (good or bad) and that you will be there for them. Try to understand the situation from their perspective. Teens today have an additional form of communication that was not available when you were young.
- Ask your teen if he or she has a page on MySpace.com and explain the importance of not giving out personal identifiers on the website. Emphasize that safety is the key issue. If your teen has a page on the website, ask to see it. If you find any inappropriate information on the website, give your teen a chance to take it off. If it is not removed and you would like to remove your teen's profile from the website because of safety issues, you can do this by contacting one of these websites: MySpace.com (look under parental help staff), WiredSafety.org, WiredKids.org., or parryaftab.blogspot.com.
- Discuss with your teen that anything put on the website is available, not only to his or her friends, but also to over 700 million people. Talk with your teen about the fact that some employers, college admission boards, and landlords are using MySpace.com as one part of their background check. Just as you would not share personal information with a complete stranger, you should not share personal information (e.g., name, address, phone, sexual orientation, place of employment, etc.) on the website. One helpful feature is that teens can make their webpage private so that only their friends will be able to access it. Discuss the blocking feature with your teen.
- Set rules regarding computer use (where, when, etc.). Do not allow teens to be on the computer for unlimited time in an unsupervised situation. Keep the computer in a place that you are able to monitor (e.g., kitchen, living room, etc.) easily. Do not allow your child to keep the computer in his or her bedroom.
- Discuss with your teen what happens when he or she accepts someone as a friend on MySpace.com. For example, when someone accepts a "friend" on the website he or she is linked to other "friends" who are already on a particular

webpage. This may create a situation where your son or daughter is linked to someone with whom he or she may not want to communicate. MySpace has a blocking feature that teens can use if they do not want to converse with a particular person.

- Encourage your teen to talk to you about his or her experiences online and to let you know if anything is going on that is making him or her feel uncomfortable. If your teen tells you that he or she is being cyber-bullied by a student in the school district, there are several things that you can do. As stated in our Code of Student Conduct, if the cyber-bullying occurs during school hours, on school grounds, or using school technology, this may lead to disciplinary action. Harassment and grievance procedures are completed through the Office of Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO). Students can always call the 24 hour anonymous Silence Hurts Hotline if they are being bullied or have information on bullying at 754-321-0911. Cyber-bullying and stalking should also be reported to the website directly.
- Review the profile that your child has on MySpace often. If you cannot find your teen's webpage, you can use the "search" feature to find it by entering your child's name, school, or email address. Again, if you find inappropriate information on the website, give your teen a chance to remove it.
- Search engines, such as Google, can be used to help keep your teen safe. Google your teen's names and address once a week to see if anything has been posted about them.
- Learn to use the computer and navigate the internet (websites listed at the end of this article). Teens use a lot of acronyms (e.g., J/K, LOL, PIR, etc.) on the internet. There is a "cheat sheet" of acronyms on MSNBC.com under the show Dateline.
- Check out the resources, such as www.I-Safe.org, that are available on the internet. I-Safe.org is a website with many resources for parents, including a parent guide that has numerous safety tips.
- Consider using a contract with your teen. There is a Family Contract for Online Safety (both a kid's pledge and a parent's pledge) that you can download and print. One example of such a contract is available on www.safekids.com.
- Talk with your teen about the possibility that the individuals they meet online may not be who they appear to be in their photos and that they may not be telling the truth. Discuss the possibility that many sexual predators use the website posing as teens.
- Do not allow your teen to meet someone they have been talking to online in a face-to-face situation without an adult. Stress that you are not trying to invade his or her privacy, but rather to keep them safe. Always accompany your teen and make sure that the meeting is in a public area.

- Talk with your teen about the importance of not giving out his/her primary email address to people he/she does not know. Stress the importance of using a gender-neutral username in order to avoid being targeted by a predator using gender as part of their search criteria.
- There is a fine line between an individual's right to privacy and safety issues. This is a personal decision that may be different for each family depending on their particular situation. If you find that your teen has been involved in unsafe behavior and feel that he or she is at-risk, there is software that records what has been put on MySpace.com. For further information on this software, go to www.software4parents.com or www.spectorsoft.com.
- Filters are another tool that are available to try to control what your teen can access on the internet. Keep in mind, however, that you will not be able to limit your teen's access to particular sites all of the time. Internet access is readily available in coffee shops, internet cafes, schools, peer's homes, etc., so it is pivotal that you talk (not lecture) with your teen regarding internet safety issues. To get further information on various types of filters, go to www.getnetwise.org/tools.

The proliferation of websites such as MySpace.com will certainly continue. Use it as a learning experience and as an opportunity to connect with your teen, while remaining open to new experiences on the web. In the near future, you may find yourself becoming a "netizen" of the world. For further information and resources on internet safety, you can visit the following sites:

- Wiredsafety.org
- Wiredkids.com
- Aftab.com
- Cyberlawenforcement.org
- Katiesplace.org
- Teenangels.org
- Safekids.com
- Disney.go.com/cybersafety
- Wiredkids.org
- Internetsuperheroes.org
- Cyberbullying.org
- MSNBC.com