

# Social Networking Sites – A Predator’s Playground?

**Posting too much information on social networking sites may be dangerous.**

A new craze is spreading among teens across the nation – and it’s growing with every click of the computer mouse. Chat sites, social networking sites, diary sites – they are called by different names but all serve the same purpose. These sites give teens a new hot place to stay in touch with their friends, meet new friends, plan events, and get all of the latest gossip. You may have never heard of MySpace.com, Xanga.com, Thefacebook.com or Thelivejournal.com, but it's a safe bet that your kids have heard of the sites and are already spending a lot of time surfing these sites.

Sites like these are cyber secrets that teenagers and “tweens” keep from tech-challenged parents who are not computer savvy. The sites create a world where the kids next door can play any role they want, but the freedom of internet sites like these comes with a price. Even the smartest children may not realize that everyone with Internet access, including sexual predators, may see the pictures and personal information they post.

Social Networking Sites have become extremely popular among teens and young adults who post profiles, photos and blogs—often chock-full of revealing personal details--for the world (including predators) to see. Sergeant Brian Donnelly of the Greenville County Sheriff’s Office has seen the dangers of sites like these and reports that "Predators are window-shopping on sites like MySpace." To keep children safe, Donnelly “discourages people from posting any identifying information.” He warns that “young teens often list the school they attend, which could lead a predator right to her door.”

Internet predators almost always are older men who correspond extensively with victims (75% of them young teenage girls) before meeting them. But simply telling kids not to post personal information and to refrain from meeting strangers may not be enough. Donnelly says that “parents should teach teens that relationships with adults are both illegal and doomed for failure.”

Parents must focus on Internet safety. Although Internet sex crimes represent only 1% to 2% of all sex crimes against children, the danger is real and is likely growing because of the Internet's increasing popularity, says Linda Davis, Director of Greenville Rape Crisis. “The Internet is an important and fabulous place for many reasons,” says Linda Brees, Manager, Safe Kids Upstate, “but we need to protect this fabulous place and try to keep it safe. Just like New York, we still want to be able to visit the Internet even though some places are dangerous. We just need to be able to keep our families away from the dangerous parts.”

Not only is the Internet growing in popularity, but social networking sites are some of the fastest growing sites. MySpace.com is now the third most-viewed Website, generating more daily hits than Google, eBay, AOL and Hotmail. Up to 160,000 new members join the site every day, according to MySpace.com. It's free, easy to join, and easy to message its members. Kids chat about everything from school, to sports, to fundraisers for Katrina victims. It all seems like innocent fun, and it can be. But many parents and teens are unaware there are hidden dangers.

Teens love showing off their MySpace profiles to their friends and even to friends of their friends. If children are posting information on a public website that now has more than 43 million members, should it also be OK for parents to look at their child's profile? Many teens think that prying parental eyes should not be allowed on the site and compare this to a parent reading a child's diary or listening in on private phone conversations. However, Safe Kids Upstate thinks that it is necessary for parents to view these sites to ensure that their kids are staying safe on social networking websites. Parents need to keep an eye on the photos, journal entries and messages on their child's MySpace page and should worry about their kids making inappropriate postings and about online predators who might target the vulnerability of children.

When Safe Kids Upstate surfed MySpace, we found scenes of binge drinking, apparent drug use, teens posing in underwear, and other members simulating sex and even having it. We also found pages that were less provocative, but potentially more dangerous. On many pages, teens listed not only their names and addresses, but even cell phone numbers and after school schedules. Even kids who don't list their name and address can provide enough personal information— such as the kinds of bands and boys they love— for a pedophile to con their way into their lives.

Teens have a hard time recognizing the dangers; to them, it seems like they are simply talking to a computer monitor. However, in the last month, authorities have charged at least three men with sexually assaulting teenagers they found through MySpace.com and just this week, police found a missing 15-year-old girl who investigators say was sexually assaulted by a 26-year-old man she met through the site. MySpace members are now warning each other about the danger of sharing information online. Hopefully the teenagers will begin to see the dangers, but it will also always be a parent's responsibility to protect our children from this danger just as we would with other dangers.

## **Common Questions and Helpful Hints**

### **What makes the social-networking sites more dangerous than regular Web pages?**

Social Networking Sites are “one-stop shopping” for predators. Anyone with internet access can find your child’s profile and instant messenger information with a few clicks. Predators don’t bother with going into internet chat rooms when they can stroll through a social networking site and look for pretty faces. On a single page, they can find a teenager’s photo, contact information, and lots of other information. Police officers that work with Safe Kids Upstate tell us that when a predator starts grooming a child, he looks for vulnerability. With easy access to a diary or blog, a predator doesn’t have to do much work to get past the first layer of vulnerability.

### **How to Protect Your Child:**

The main internet safety rule is that kids should not post too much identifying information online (especially their last name). Even if you speak to your children frequently about this, you can’t always trust your children to follow this rule, because they usually think that things like this won’t ever happen to them. In addition, your children’s friends are probably telling them that these sites are safe, and children often think their friends are more Internet savvy than their parents.

If your child wants to have a MySpace page, you need to have access to it. When you explain the real dangers of the internet to your children, you can make a rule that if they want to use the computer, they will have to share the access information. If you don’t feel right about doing this, you can install monitoring software to see what they are doing without them knowing about it. You can also install filtering software that will stop them from visiting specific sites.

### ***Steps to Keeping Your Child Safe Online:***

- 1) Place the computer in the most public room in your home.
- 2) Establish ground rules for Internet usage. Write a "Family Pledge on Internet Safety."
- 3) Instruct your child not to give out personal information without your permission.
- 4) Read the privacy policy of any site that asks for personal information before you allow your child to respond.
- 5) Share time online by surfing on the Internet with your child.
- 6) If your child wants to meet in person someone they've met online, make sure a parent is present at the meeting.
- 7) Instruct your child never to respond to email or chat messages that make them feel uncomfortable. Encourage your child to share their online experiences with you and report uncomfortable messages if/when they occur.
- 8) Inform your ISP (Internet Service Provider) of any inappropriate uses of the Internet encountered by you or your child.

- 9) Know exactly what various parental control tools can and cannot do and how they work.

### **Parental Control Tools**

At any moment, you and your children are just one typo away from pornography and one click away from internet predators! To keep your kids from wandering into danger online, consider downloading or purchasing an Internet Safety Program and a Monitoring Program. The Internet Safety Program will help keep pornography, gambling and other unacceptable sites out of your home and the Monitoring Program will let you monitor what your children do online and who they talk to online. Here are some of our favorite programs.

### **Internet Safety Programs**

- 1) **Norton Internet Security:** Norton is a trusted name in virus protection that now offers a complete security package for your family! The parental controls on this program offer customizable options and a Privacy Control feature which blocks confidential information from being sent through popular instant messenger programs. The program is packaged with Norton's virus protection program and firewall, which gives the package an excellent value.
- 2) **McAfee Privacy Service:** This program is a low-hassle product that protects your kids from pornography while they are online.
- 3) **Net Nanny:** This is an excellent program if you have children that are experimenting with unacceptable online sites. It shows clear messages to the user about violations and keeps logs that you can view to find out what they have been doing.
- 4) **Cybersitter:** Cybersitter is another excellent program that filters unwanted pornography and other questionable sites from your computer. Cybersitter allows parents to override blocked sites, add their own sites to block, specify allowable times to access the Internet, and record AOL Instant Message and Yahoo Messenger conversations. It also maintains a detailed log of all Internet activity and violations and will even send a daily report to parents by e-mail.
- 5) **We-Blocker:** This is a free filtering program that works well to protect your family. Be sure to read instructions before installing on Windows XP.
- 6) **CyberPatrol:** This program has some nice features that help parents control what their children see and do online. CyberPatrol monitors Internet activity, blocks harmful sites and images, restricts chats, limits time online and access to programs, controls program downloads, and blocks personal information from being sent from your computer.

- 7) **Content Barrier for Mac:** If you have a Mac computer, you probably already know that finding software can be tough at times. ContentBarrier is a filtering program designed specifically for Mac users that blocks unacceptable sites, monitors chats and shuts them down if inappropriate language occurs, limits online time and downloads, and more.

### **Monitoring Softwares:**

- 1) **eBlaster:** This software works without the knowledge of the user and emails reports to you. Since the reports are emailed to you, you do not have to have access to your child's computer.
- 2) **Child Safe:** This monitoring program emails a log of your child's internet activity to you and will also limit their access to specific sites.
- 3) **Parents Tools for AIM:** This is the best solution for parents who want to limit and/or monitor AIM (AOL Instant Messenger). It not only records conversations, but it also includes the ability to limit dangerous features on AIM and set up a schedule for when your children are allowed to chat.
- 4) **Spector:** This program works without the knowledge of the user, but you have to go check the reports on the same machine that your child is using.
- 5) **SentryPC:** This is another great monitoring program with many features.