

Internet Safety

Is Using the Internet Dangerous?

Humans are social creatures by nature. We like being with other people and we rely on each other to meet most of the necessities and luxuries of modern life. We *can* live in isolation like Henry Thoreau did on Walden Pond, but most of us would prefer not to, because we would have to do without so many things. It would be difficult to work and earn money in isolation, and we'd have to provide for all of our own needs. For us to purchase something at a convenience store requires the work of many others to create, market, transport, stock, ring up, account for, and many other tasks.

We can also use computers independently, and do, but one of the main benefits of using computers now is having Internet access. One of the beauties of the Internet is that it's free and available to everyone. Anyone and everyone can post content, and does! This also makes it difficult to differentiate quality material from irrelevant information, marketing ploys, etc., but that's part of the price we pay for having few restrictions on posting information. (These freedoms are currently under attack in the U.S. by those who would tax and regulate for their own gain, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.) The "Pew Internet and American Life Project" (2003) found that:

44% of adult American Internet users – more than 53 million people – have contributed material to the online world. Content creation in our definition includes creating a Web site, posting material to another Web site for work, family or another organization, posting materials to a personal or another person's Weblog or online diary. It also includes posting photos, artwork, writing, or audio and video files to the World Wide Web, to a chat room or discussion or newsgroup.

Just as we need to check the author of an article or the funding source for a research study in order to properly evaluate it, we need to know something about the publisher(s) of Internet content in order to know what their biases and motivations might be. But information about who is publishing material on the Internet isn't always readily available. There have always been charletans, thieves, and criminals as an undercurrent of human society and the Internet online community is no different. Only a small percentage of people are up to no good and trying to take advantage of others, but the danger exists as well as precautions and ways to avoid trouble. It's especially important to monitor children's Internet use and teach them about issues and answers in an age-appropriate way. Children and teens represent a large percentage of Internet users and are especially vulnerable. There are ways to be street-smart in an urban environment where risks are greater, and there are ways to be street-smart in the online environment as well.

What Is Social Networking?

People are using the Internet not just to find information but to find each other. Two kinds of Internet interaction environments are now common: "blogs" and "wikis." Blogs are Internet "web logs" which are rather like a diary. Wikipedia (see below) defines it as:

...a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function more as personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic... "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia which is created, maintained and updated by anyone and everyone. It is a contraction of the words wiki and encyclopedia. Wikipedia defines a wiki as:

...a type of website that allows visitors to easily add, remove and edit available content, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring...There has been controversy over Wikipedia's reliability and accuracy, with the site receiving criticism for its susceptibility to vandalism, uneven quality and inconsistency... Currently Wikipedia has more than 1.4 million articles in the English-language version.

Wikipedia is a great example of how social networking sites are changing the face of the internet. We no longer rely on single sources to publish information, but as a collective world community, we are broadening our access to knowledge and contributing to the knowledge base ourselves. This is an exciting development with broad implications, mostly good, but with these freedoms also come hazards.

Alexa.com publishes a list of the most popular web sites in the United States. Currently, Yahoo is first, followed by Google, and third is MySpace - a social networking site. MySpace (according to MySpace) is for:

- Friends who want to talk Online
- Single people who want to meet other Singles
- Matchmakers who want to connect their friends with other friends
- Families who want to keep in touch--map your Family Tree
- Business people and co-workers interested in networking
- Classmates and study partners
- Anyone looking for long lost friends.

Social networking sites are proliferating rapidly. Some of the most widely used are:

<http://myspace.com/>

<http://www.facebook.com/>

<http://gaiaonline.com/>

<http://www.friendster.com/>

<http://www.xanga.com/>

Older children and teens often look to their peers for validation. Achieving popularity within one's peer group is often of primary importance in these key developmental years, and online popularity is a component. Many cell phones have photo and video capabilities as well as instant text messaging,

email access and web browsing. It's easy to forget that what's posted on the web is not just viewable by your friends, but by anyone and everyone around the world, in an instant.

What Are the Dangers?

Some of the dangers of using the Internet include "Internet predators, online relationships, cyber bullying, cyber stalking, piracy, identity theft and more" (WebWiseKids). It's easy for people to pretend and fabricate identities, choose false names, post photos not of themselves, etc. Sometimes this is harmless but sometimes not. It may be a deliberate ploy to exploit, lure, harass or harm others. MySpace Safety Tips are included at the end of this paper in APPENDIX A.

Maintaining anonymity is perhaps the most important concept for maintaining online safety. Don't reveal personal or contact information to anyone. Your friends already know how to get in touch with you. For example, don't let people know your real name, especially your last name. Choose a special online name that's different, or use only your first name. Don't type your phone number or address. Remember that chat rooms are not private; the Internet is not private. As far as conversation and content go, see if it passes the "Grandma Test." How would you feel if your grandmother read and saw your blog? Employers, personnel departments and school admissions officers are now checking MySpace and other social networking sites to do background checks on their candidates. How would you feel if your potential employer or the college of your choice were to see what you have posted? People have been denied jobs, fired from their jobs or rejected from colleges because of what they wrote online about themselves, their opinions and activities. According to the 2005 study by executive job-search agency ExecuNet, cited in the Chicago Tribune, 75 percent of recruiters use Web research as part of the applicant screening process. One intern was fired when the CEO discovered that the intern's Facebook profile noted that he would "spend most of [his] days screwing around on IM and talking to [his] friends and getting paid for it" (Conlin 2006).

How Should People Protect Themselves and Their Children?

Nicole Verardi writes in her article, "MySpace in College Admission" (2006):

http://www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/StepsNewsletter/myspace_students.htm

What You Can Do

- First, be safe! Never post personal information such as your address, daily schedule, phone number, etc. Check out safety guidelines from the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use and Wired Safety.
- Make your profile private so that strangers can't look at your information, and be cautious about adding new friends who you do not personally know.
- Take down any questionable photos or exchanges between you and your friends. Remember, pictures and references of you on your friends' pages can be damaging too. You can ask them to take down this kind of information.
- Don't get a false sense of security on sites like Facebook, where you need an academic address, to view pages. It's easy for faculty, alumni and random people to get on and look at your wall and photos.

People Can See Everything

Although blogs can be fun, remember that what you post is for public view, like broadcasting it on the six o'clock news. So when it's time to apply for college, give your blog a second look to make sure you feel comfortable sharing everything you have posted with an admission officer and, later, with potential employers because your site becomes permanent, public information about you.

Different Audiences Require Different Messages and Approaches

In teaching about Internet safety, as in teaching about anything, the approach must be sensitive to the learners' age. The content and presentation must be adjusted accordingly. These different audiences are suggested and may have some overlap:

- 1) Elementary Children grades 2-5
- 2) Middle and High School Students, grades 6-12
- 3) Parents, adults, and college students
- 4) Teachers, K-adult need more information than other adults since they must be prepared to teach their constituents, provide resources, etc.

Some examples of internet safety messages adapted for children have been created and posted by www.safekids.com. "Daffy Dave" sings the "Safe Kids Online Song" at <http://safekids.com/safesong/>. Kid's Rules for Online Safety are available at <http://www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm>.

WiredSafety.com has created a wonderful set of animations which are way more effective than lecturing. In "Mean Girls" (<http://www.wiredsafety.org/wiredlearning/videos/ynkvideos/YNK-MG-gitl.swf>) a 14-year-old girl thinks she is instant messaging with "Heart-Throb Bob" and planning to meet him at the mall. We see that "Bob" is actually three older girls who are planning to embarrass her the next day at school. The message of the piece is that "Bob" "May not be cute... May not be 14... and May not be a boy!... You never know!... ThinkBe4YouClick." Messages like these take time to craft but can inform best by combining education with entertainment and letting the viewer reach his/her own conclusions. Although there is a quick, hard-hitting message at the end, it only reinforces the message that the viewer has already constructed for herself.

References and Resources for Further Information

<http://www.safekids.com/>

<http://www.safeteens.com/>

<http://www.cyberangels.org/>

<http://www.netsmartz.org/>

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguide.htm> – FBI Parent’s Guide to Internet Safety

<http://yahooligans.yahoo.com/parents/> – Internet safety tips

http://onguardonline.gov/socialnetworking_youth.html – OnGuard Online: FTC safety tips

<http://www.wiredwithwisdom.org/> – (Web Wise Kids)

Web Wise Kids is an online safety organization. Here kids, parents, teachers and law enforcement discover innovative Internet safety education programs to protect today’s youth from online dangers.

<http://www.blogsafety.com/forum.jspa?forumID=1100000006>

BlogSafety.com forum - where parents, teens, educators, and experts discuss and learn about safe blogging and social networking. You might call this social networking about social networks!

<http://www.myspace.com/CommonSenseMedia> – (Common Sense Media)

<http://www.csriu.org/> – Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/>

“Keeping Kids and Teens Safe on MySpace, Facebook, and other Networking Sites”

“The world’s largest online safety and help group”

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/wiredlearning/videos/index.html>

WiredSafety’s fantastic video resources in Flash and Quicktime formats

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/113/report_display.asp

The Pew Internet & American Life Project produces reports that explore the impact of the Internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care, and civic and political life.

APPENDIX A

MySpace Safety Tips: (from <http://www.myspace.com/Modules/Common/Pages/SafetyTips.aspx>)

MySpace makes it easy to express yourself, connect with friends and make new ones, but please remember that what you post publicly could embarrass you or expose you to danger. Here are some common sense guidelines that you should follow when using MySpace:

- **Don't forget that your profile and MySpace forums are public spaces.** Don't post anything you wouldn't want the world to know (e.g., your phone number, address, IM screens name, or specific whereabouts). Avoid posting anything that would make it easy for a stranger to find you, such as where you hang out every day after school.
- **People aren't always who they say they are. Be careful about adding strangers to your friends list.** It's fun to connect with new MySpace friends from all over the world, but avoid meeting people in person whom you do not fully know. If you must meet someone, do it in a public place and bring a friend or trusted adult.
- **Harassment, hate speech and inappropriate content should be reported.** If you feel someone's behavior is inappropriate, react. Talk with a trusted adult, or report it to MySpace or the authorities.
- **Don't post anything that would embarrass you later.** Think twice before posting a photo or info you wouldn't want your parents or boss to see!
- **Don't mislead people into thinking that you're older or younger.** If you are under 14 and pretend to be older, customer service will delete your profile. If you are over 18 and pretend to be a teenager to contact underage users, customer service will delete your profile.
- **Don't get hooked by a phishing scam.** Phishing is a method used by fraudsters to try to get your personal information, such as your username and password, by pretending to be a site you trust. [Click here](#) to learn more.

MySpace Tips for Parents:

For teens, MySpace is a popular online hangout because the site makes it easy for them to express themselves and keep in touch with their friends.

As a parent, please consider the following guidelines to help your children make safe decisions about using online communities.

- **Talk to your kids about why they use MySpace, how they communicate with others and how they represent themselves on MySpace.**
- **Kids shouldn't lie about how old they are. MySpace members must be 14 years of age or older.** We take extra precautions to protect our younger members and we are not able to do so if they do not identify themselves as such. MySpace will delete users whom we find to be younger than 14, or those misrepresenting their age.
- **MySpace is a public space.** Members shouldn't post anything they wouldn't want the world to know (e.g., phone number, address, IM screen name, or specific whereabouts). Tell your children they should avoid posting anything that would make it easy for a stranger to find them, such as their local hangouts.
- **Remind them not to post anything that could embarrass them later or expose them to danger.** Although MySpace is public, teens sometimes think that adults can't see what they post. Tell them that they shouldn't post photos or info they wouldn't want adults to see.
- **People aren't always who they say they are. Ask your children to be careful about adding strangers to their friends list.** It's fun to connect with new MySpace friends from all over the world, but members should be cautious when communicating with people they don't know. They should talk to you if they want to meet an online friend in person, and if you think it's safe, any meeting should take place in public and with friends or a trusted adult present.
- **Harassment, hate speech and inappropriate content should be reported.** If your kids encounter inappropriate behavior, let them know that they can let you know, or they should report it to MySpace or the authorities.
- **Don't get hooked by a phishing scam.** Phishing is a method used by fraudsters to try to get your personal information, such as your username and password, by pretending to be a site you trust. [Click here](#) to learn more.