MySpace:
A Guide for Parents

What Is MySpace?

MySpace is an Internet social networking site that connects people worldwide. On MySpace, you can talk to someone anywhere in the world about anything. You can ask questions about hobbies, learn how to fix things, or just talk back and forth on discussion boards. People express themselves by displaying pictures, adding personal music, creating a personalized site, showing off their work, or sharing information about their favorite bands

MySpace is also used for advertising purposes. Many modeling companies and TV shows have a page. Celebrities do, too. The biggest trends on MySpace are modeling and music pages. Many young girls post pictures of themselves, dreaming of becoming models; hundreds of teen boys advertise their talent by creating musical profiles.

Similar social websites include facebook.com, tagged.com, and friendster.com. Usually registration is free, and identity verification is not required. Any age restriction to access "adult" material tends to be on the honor system. Most sites have millions of members and rely on self-policing.

Dangers in MySpace?

Just as you helped your child learn to wait until it was safe to cross the road, you can help your child learn to navigate MySpace in a safe way. Parents are ultimately the ones responsible for keeping children safe online. No site can be 100% safe, but you can educate and protect your child against three risks: sexual predators, cyberbullying, and viruses.

Sexual Predators: Social networking sites encourage people to share all kinds of information about themselves. Combine this with the unlimited range in space and time that is the Internet, and something created to be shared with a few friends can now be seen by millions. Some in that mix may not be friendly.

Anyone is a potential victim, but an unhappy child is especially vulnerable. Troubled relationships with parents, few friends, an interest in alcohol or drugs, or problems at school—these are the signs a predator looks for in order to

"I am in the 9th grade, too!"

start "grooming" the potential victim. Grooming can involve flattery, sympathy, gifts, money, or offers of modeling jobs. The goal is persuade the child to meet offline. Groomers are self-taught experts in getting children to reveal their needs and desires and then tailoring their messages to those interests.

Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying is another negative potential. What might have been a whispered campaign of nasty gossip or a few words scrawled on a bathroom door back in the day can become a slanderous attack or defamation posted to the world today. The relative anonymity of the Internet appeals to bullies. Cyberbullying may be an early warning for more violent behavior.

Viruses: MySpace has been hit by hackers who introduced viruses that can change settings, delete files, secretly track users' movements online, and even damage computers. Or, your child may unintentionally visit a malicious web page or download something that infects your computer with a virus. Even if a child realizes what's been done, he or she may not tell for fear of punishment.

How Can You Protect Your Child?

Be aware of what your child is doing on the computer. Talk with your child; remind him or her that you are there to help if needed.

- Keep the computer in the family room or living room, not in your child's bedroom.
- Talk about what he or she enjoys online.

- Review your child's profile.
- Encourage your child to come to you if anything goes wrong online. Be available to discuss any questions or concerns.
- Encourage your child to balance time on- and off-line and to enjoy life beyond cyberspace.
- Teach your child to be a responsible cybercitizen and to use critical thinking skills.

Do's & Don'ts

Use these "do's & don'ts" to launch the conversation with your child:

Do . . .

- Follow the golden rule of cyberspace: *Don't do anything online that you wouldn't do in real life!*
- Respect others.
- Walk away from the computer and "Take 5" before responding to something upsetting.
- Remember that even if you remove information from a site, saved or cached versions may still exist on other people's machines.

Don't . . .

- Share your password. *Not even with your best friend!*
- Pirate software or motion pictures.
- Post information unless you are comfortable with anyone seeing it.
- Believe everything you read online.
- Share personal information: pictures, names & addresses, schools you attend or mall near your house, cell & phone numbers, name of school teams.
- Use the calendar feature.
- Accept Friend Requests or Messages from strangers.
- Accept anyone without a picture on your Friendlist.
- Spread rumors, assist in cyberbullying, or share private communications online.

Protect . . .

Use Technology to Protect Your Family

- Set some parental controls within your browser.
- Install spyware and adware blocking software on your computer.
- Make sure you have a working firewall.
- Install anti-virus software and update it regularly.
- Take advantage of spam-blocking tools offered by your Internet provider or e-mail software.
- Create a login password for MySpace so that you can log in and view your child's space.

And remember . . . you are not a bad parent if you don't know everything about computers. But you can become a better parent by keeping lines of communication open. You may be surprised at what you can learn.

Navigation Tips . . .

How to Use MySpace

Enter the password and email address into the log-in box at www.myspace.com. If you don't have your child's password, you can request it by clicking "forgot password." The password will be sent to the email address used to log in. You must have the login password for Myspace and the right email address in order receive any new password your child may create.

- To view your child's page, click the "profile" link at the top of the page. To view pictures, comments, or friends, roll over the profile link and a drop-down menu will appear with several options. Click whichever you would like to view.
- To view Messages, Friend Requests (Friend Request sent to child), or Sent Requests (Friend Requests sent from child), roll over the mail link located at the top of the page.
- Use your child's email address instead of a name. Most people on Myspace do not use their real name.

To protect children online, check their Messages, Sent and Received Friend Requests, Comments, and Pictures.

- ***Messages*** show what your child is talking about with others. You can see if your child has given out personal information or made plans to meet with someone. (Exchanging numbers is a good sign that both parties are planning to meet.)
- ***Sent requests*** can show what types of people interest your child. For example, requests may be sent out to older women/men.
- ***Received requests*** tells you who your child is attracting. If your child is receiving requests from people who are not peers, check for something amiss—sexy pictures or maybe a claim to be older.

View ALL pictures, text, bulletins, and blogs every once in a while to make sure that your child isn't posting anything that could be dangerous.

Remember

- Everything on MySpace can be hidden to make it difficult to view without using the "profile" link. Pictures, friends, comments, and even blogs can be moved around or removed on both the profile and home page.
- Friends and bulletins are located on the home page but can also be "hidden" in a drop box. To view everything, click the small arrow located next to each box.
- Almost all features on MySpace can be set to "Private." To view, click on "My Account" located on the top right of the home page. Then, go through each link. If you're not sure what something is, MySpace gives a short description of each feature at the bottom of the page.

Resources:

- *Anne Collier, www.ConnectSafely.org*
- *Mindi Mcdowell, Allen Householder, http://www.us-cert.gov/cas/tips/ST05-002.html*
- *Parry Aftab, www.WiredSafety.com*
- *www.ncjrs.gov*
- *www.TeenAngels.com*

Crafted 2008 by: Ashley Kirkpatrick, Greg Brown, Sylvia McDaniel – OPD