



Decoding MySpace

It's the coolest hangout space for teens-but parents might be surprised at what their kids do there. Here's how to help keep them safe online

By Michelle Andrews

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Last year, as Margaret Sullivan was reviewing the websites her 13-year-old daughter had visited on the family computer, up popped something called *myspace.com*. Curious, she clicked on it. "Oh, my God," she thought, as she brought up a page with her daughter's full name, photograph, and school name and location in Wood-Ridge, N.J., along with personal details like her favorite bands and TV shows. "I was so upset," says Sullivan. "All someone had to do to find her was call up the school." At first, her daughter, Shannon, denied knowing anything about the site. "I knew she wasn't going to like what was up there," she says. But Shannon was distressed, too. She couldn't believe her mom was nosing around what she thought was a private place online. "I didn't know everyone could see my page," says Shannon. "I just thought it was a way to talk with my friends."

In the year and a half since Margaret and Shannon had their MySpace confrontation, the social-networking site has exploded in popularity and become the focus of intense parental concern. There are other sites where teens can post profiles and blogs, leave messages for one another, and connect with new people through friends or on their own-sites like Facebook, Xanga, Sconex, Bebo, and Tagged. But MySpace has captured parents' imaginations like no other, and in the worst possible way. To many parents, who may have gotten an eyeful of its sometimes-titillating profiles and photos, MySpace seems like Lake Wobegon gone horribly wrong: a place where all the women are fast, the men are hard-drinking, and the children take an above-average interest in imitating them. How can they allow their kids to roam freely in such an environment? Anyone could be lurking there.

They're right, and to judge from the numbers, it seems that practically everyone is. To join the club, you answer a few questions, upload a photo or two, and *voilà*, you've got a MySpace profile. Although the site started out as a place for musicians and artists to connect with one another, it has gradually morphed into an online hot spot, and its popularity now easily dwarfs that of others of its kind. The site currently has more than 100 million profiles, with 230,000 new members signing up every day. In August, MySpace accounted for 81 percent of visitors to leading social-networking sites, according to Hitwise, a market-research company. Facebook, a site that's popular with college students, came in a distant second, receiving just 7.3 percent of social-networking traffic. Demonstrating how important these sites are to users, Facebook received scores of angry E-mails last week when it changed some of its features.

Get involved. Among the many millions of people visiting these sites, some, indeed, are sexual predators, and there have been some highly publicized accounts of teenagers who've been lured into

offline meetings at which they've been assaulted. Parents, understandably, are traumatized by such stories. By focusing so intently on protecting their kids from stalkers, however, parents have overlooked other less sensational but important aspects of their kids' online experiences. How teens interact with their peers in cyberspace, for example, and how they present themselves through images and words may not be life-or-death decisions, but they can have a serious impact on their lives offline. As the new school year begins, parents have an opportunity to take an interest and get involved in their kids' online experiences, if they haven't done so already.

Even though social-networking sites, instant messaging, chat rooms, E-mail, and the like may not seem to qualify as social gathering spots to parents, for teens, they function very much like the malls and burger joints of earlier eras. They're where young people go to hang out, gossip, posture, dare, and generally figure out how the world works. "What you see is all the behaviors you should recognize from your own teenage years," says Danah Boyd, a doctoral candidate at Berkeley who has studied children's social practices online. "The difference is that now it's less physical and more word-based."

It's also available 24-7. A teenager might check MySpace from home before heading off to school to see if anyone added a comment to his page overnight. Many schools block social-networking sites, but after school, teens often spend hours on them. They'll check their own profiles to see what comments friends may have posted on them, which may be public and available for all the world to read. They may write a few sentences or a couple of paragraphs in their blogs. They'll probably also instant message, or IM, friends to recap the day's events or make plans, upload new photos, or change the music on their page. Then they'll visit their friends' pages to see if they've uploaded any new photos or videos, read new comments from other friends, and post comments of their own. "People have their friends, and now they have the Internet, too," says Matt Zeitlin, a 16-year-old junior in Piedmont, Calif. "It's a more evolved way to communicate than a telephone or cellphone or IM." For some teens, keeping up with their friends online becomes almost an obsession. They compulsively check their messages and look to see who's remarking on their page throughout the day.

Parenting in this virtual world doesn't require a whole new set of skills, though a little technological savvy sure doesn't hurt. What it does require is a willingness to pay attention, ask a lot of questions, and set some rules and stick by them, even at the risk of making your kids mad at you-familiar parenting territory.

"Chicken." But too often that's not happening. Parents who would never allow their child to go to a party unless they knew that an adult would be present let their kids pilot themselves through the online world without any supervision whatsoever. A June survey of 267 pairs of teens and parents in the Los Angeles metropolitan area by a psychology professor at California State University-Dominguez Hills found that two thirds of parents had never talked with their teen about their MySpace use, and 38 percent of them had never seen their child's MySpace profile. "Parents are chicken," says Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy lawyer and executive director of WiredSafety.org, a nonprofit aimed at keeping kids safe online that has trained 450 teenagers in online safety and sends them out to speak to schools and other groups. "They don't understand the technology, so they're reluctant to get involved."

But this is not the time to give in to your inner technophobe. You may have never sent an instant message, uploaded a video, or written a blog, but you can help your kids develop the judgment to better protect their safety online and set standards that will help guide their behavior. This is especially important since legislation that recently passed the House of Representatives and is

currently under consideration by the Senate would ban social-networking sites from schools and libraries, leaving parents as the only consistent adult arbiter of their children's day-to-day social-networking behavior.

The problem with the Internet isn't necessarily that sketchy strangers try to entice kids to meet them in person. Strangers approach children on terra firma as well. The problem is that online there are no physical cues to alert a teenage girl that the "boy" who's IMing her about a hot new band is actually a 45-year-old pedophile who's interested in sharing a lot more than his play-list. One of the ways to protect your child is to make sure his or her profile is stripped of identifying details, come-hither photos, and the sort of "I'm lonely" comments that are a red flag for predators (box, below). Another important step is to tackle the issue of making friends online head-on.

Strangers. First, you should understand that "friend" doesn't necessarily have the same meaning on MySpace that it does in the offline world. When your teen creates a profile, Tom Anderson, one of the MySpace founders and a man your child will almost certainly never meet, automatically becomes her first friend, and his name and photo appear on her page. "'Friends' means this is a collection of people I want to pay attention to online," says Boyd. A teen may add a friend because she wants to receive bulletins from this person. Bulletins are announcements someone sends to everyone on his or her list of friends about upcoming parties, for example, or noteworthy events. Or the new pal could be someone who shares a similar interest, such as the same hobby or sport. More troubling, though, some teens accept total strangers as friends in an attempt to boost the total number of friends noted on their page and so appear popular.

Some parents set rules about MySpace friends: MySpace is where you gab with friends you already have, not make new ones. Period. At a minimum, "a parent needs to have a chat with their child about risks," says Larry Magid, coauthor of the new book *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking*. "People may not be who they say they are; they may be misrepresenting their motives." The wealth of detailed personal information people post online makes social-networking sites fertile ground for predators. While the material may seem innocuous—a home state or a list of favorite TV shows—a predator can use it to his advantage. "The sites help offenders find targets that are close by," says Brad Russ, the former police chief in Portsmouth, N.H., and director of the Internet Crimes Against Children Training and Technical Assistance Program, a Department of Justice effort to help local law enforcement agencies better respond to online sexual exploitation. "One way to break the ice with a child is to become knowledgeable about something that child likes to do," says Russ. Once a child is comfortable E-mailing or IMing the new confidant about, say, who's a favorite on *American Idol*, conversation easily shifts to more personal topics. Eventually, it won't seem strange to the child if the new pal suggests a face-to-face meeting.

"Non-weird people." MySpace instituted new privacy measures in June to enhance the safety and security of the site. Now, a new feature lets users of any age choose to make their profiles private, so that only friends within their network have access to their personal dossier. In addition, no one over the age of 18 can access a 14- or 15-year-old's profile without knowing the user's full name or E-mail address. Since age verification is impossible, however, these age-based rules are easy to skirt, and many people routinely lie about their age. In fact, MySpace deletes 25,000 profiles weekly of users who don't meet the site's 14-year-old minimum age requirement, says Hemanshu Nigam, chief security officer for the site. The penalty for violators is severe. "We delete them," he says. The profiles aren't the only things that go: Anything posted on other pages disappears as well. Nigam

acknowledges the age-based system isn't perfect. "We have considered other ways to set the system up so it is not just about age."

Contrary to parents' perception that their children are easy prey for unscrupulous adults, many kids are just as wary of strangers as their parents or just plain uninterested in meeting them. Zeitlin says he and most of his friends claim to be 14 online. "I do it so people who aren't my friends can't see my profile," he says. "I wouldn't really trust someone online to introduce me to interesting or non-weird people."

According to a new study by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 7 young people ages 10 to 17 acknowledged receiving an online sexual solicitation in 2005. Five years ago, when the survey was first done, the number was higher: 1 in 5. (Online solicitation is defined as a request to engage in sexual activities or talk or give personal sexual information, from any Internet-based communication.) About 4 percent received "aggressive" solicitations, in which the person wanted to make contact offline, a number that didn't decline from the previous survey.

Dangerous ground. Parents need to be on the lookout, experts say, for unfamiliar friends who contact their children online out of the blue, as well as risky behavior on the part of kids themselves that makes them targets for predators. Too often teens post erotic photos in which they pose suggestively and expose plenty of skin, using screen names like "nasty" or "sexygirl." In their personal description, they may say they're wild or curious about having sex with a stranger. To kids, this may seem like harmless posturing. Parents can help them understand when they're on dangerous ground. "Parents need to talk about certain lines you don't cross," says Magid. "There's a difference between language that's edgy and obscene or profane, and a difference between being sexy and being sexual or slutty."

Some experts worry that while parents focus on sexual predators, however, they miss other ways in which the Internet may be negatively affecting their kids' sexual development. As parents have noticed to their dismay, many kids post very sexualized images of themselves in swimsuits or their underwear. MySpace says it has several staffers who eyeball each of the 3 million images that are posted every day, searching for-and removing-nudity, hate speech or symbols, and offensive content. But photos that are merely provocative aren't forbidden. And with virtually no supervision or monitoring of conversations online, casual banter and egging each other on about sex through online posts and instant messages ("I heard Carmen and Dave hooked up at a party." Response: "No, but he wants to!!!") set the stage for sexual experimentation once kids meet face to face. "Developmentally, the envelope has always been pushed during adolescence," says Sharon Maxwell, a clinical psychologist in Canton, Mass., who specializes in teen sexuality, "but never without any rules. And now it all happens more quickly." This speeding up of sexual development is most pronounced among middle schoolers, Maxwell says.

Just as social-networking sites and Internet communications can accelerate and amplify adolescents' normal sexual explorations, they can do the same with another time-honored teenage tradition: bullying. The old sticks-and-stones nursery rhyme seems quaint now that there's a virtual bathroom wall where kids put all manner of words and images to nasty effect. They may post an unflattering bogus profile claiming a schoolmate is an out-of-control drunk or drug user, with a picture of him passed out at a party, for example, or send scathing text messages among groups of friends when one girl dates someone a friend higher up in the social pecking order is interested in. Dozens of her friends may weigh in-"You're such a whore." "I can't believe you're such a slut."-with instant messages. "Online bullying is more vicious and damaging because it's wider spread," says Nancy Willard, executive

director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use in Eugene, Ore., an education and outreach organization. "More people have access to the communication, and there's the ability to combine damaging images."

The Internet also allows kids to impersonate one another, something that's nearly impossible to do in a school hallway. Last year, five schoolmates at a St. Louis high school decided to post a "hot/not hot" list of more than 100 female classmates, with racist and sexist comments, on Facebook. They signed the name of a 17-year-old junior, who learned of the list only when one of the girls asked him about it. "He was mortified," says Nancy, the boy's mother, who asked to use her first name only. "It was incredibly upsetting, and we were absolutely powerless."

Affirmation. As parents of teenagers are well aware, adolescence is an intensely social time, and now teens can be connected with their peers night and day. Psychologists and Internet experts say they are seeing a growing number of kids who are addicted to being online. Kids who are socially anxious or insecure may be particularly vulnerable, says Willard. Having tons of online friends and being in constant contact through text messaging or cellphones reinforce a feeling of acceptance. But these teens may come to need that hit of affirmation in the brick-and-mortar world to feel OK, she says. Setting limits on the amount of time children can spend online is one obvious strategy, but it's also critical for parents to emphasize the importance of having a balance of interests and activities. This only works, however, if parents themselves have balanced lives and aren't online all the time.

Still, social networking can also be a good thing for some teenagers. "A shy kid who has a terribly hard time expressing himself one-on-one may be much more comfortable conversing online," says Maxwell. Likewise, teens facing difficult issues—gay teens who don't feel comfortable coming out to their parents, for example—can get support online from others in the same situation.

Despite the hand-wringing that teens are spending too many hours online, not every kid is clamoring for a MySpace profile. Elisabeth Moore, a 14-year-old in Stockton Springs, Maine, checked out the site a few months ago and decided not to go back. "It seemed kind of pointless," says Moore, "seeing all these people who don't have much to do except go on the computer. You have your friends in real life; you might as well stick to them."

Common sense. Regular MySpace users, however, can get caught up in sharing their daily dramas and escapades—so engrossed that they sometimes forget the whole world may be watching. There have been many news reports of police nabbing teens who bragged about or posted pictures of their illegal exploits online. Teens in Novato, Calif., for example, got arrested when they posted a video of themselves firebombing an abandoned airplane hangar last spring. More commonplace, however, are photos and postings detailing underage drinking or pot smoking that could conceivably hurt teens' chances when they apply to college or look for a job down the road.

At this time, however, that possibility seems relatively remote. A survey by two counselors at Purdue University's Center for Career Opportunities during the past academic year found that about a third of employers screen job candidates using search engines like Google, while 11.5 percent said that they look at social-networking sites. What's more, colleges don't routinely look at applicants' MySpace or similar profiles. It's a question of time and fairness, says David Hawkins, director of public policy for the National Association for College Admission Counseling. With thousands of applications to review, admissions officers simply don't have time to run names through MySpace. At the same time, "if you look at one person's MySpace profile for something that's not submitted on the application," says

Hawkins, "you'd have to look at them all." However, that doesn't mean that employers and admissions officers will turn a blind eye if a problematic profile is brought to their attention. "If a high school counselor said this kid had a MySpace profile that said very negative things about a teacher," Hawkins says, "the admissions officer might consider it."

Many middle schools and high schools currently block social-networking sites on school computers. The Fenn School, a private school in Concord, Mass., for fourth-to-ninth-grade boys, is one of them. School administrators decided that any technology used in the school should serve educational purposes, and MySpace and similar sites don't meet that standard, says Rob Gustavson, the assistant headmaster. At the same time, school administrators believe they have a responsibility to help students develop common sense about their use of technology. One of the segments in the "student life" course, in fact, covers using technology wisely. "We want them to be able to make these judgments when they get outside," says Gustavson. The Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, which passed the House of Representatives in July, would make blocking of these sites at public schools and libraries mandatory. Although the law's intention is to protect minors from sexual solicitations or suggestive material, many experts believe it is written too broadly and will obstruct many useful sites. And they also argue that banning the sites from the very locations where there are adults present to monitor kids' online activities is a mistake. "If we lock these sites out of the schools, adults are turning their backs on kids and making them deal with these issues on their own," says Henry Jenkins, codirector of the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Many experts note that with the proliferation of technology, banning social-networking sites either at school or at home is unlikely to be effective in any case. "The kid will just go underground," says Magid. "You can put a filter on a computer, but you can't prevent him from using it on his cellphone or another computer."

Michelle Alden says she's been tempted to ban MySpace from her house many times. The 40-year-old teacher's aide in Idaho City, Idaho, says she is uncomfortable with the site's profile format, as it encourages youngsters to present themselves as if they're looking for sex. Why, she wonders, does the site ask kids to describe their body type and sexual orientation? But instead of trying to forbid the site, she's opted to set guidelines and talk regularly with her 15-year-old daughter about her page, which she uses primarily to stay in touch with friends. "I think it's better to go ahead and have the struggle, because soon enough she's going to be out on her own," she says, "and I only have a few more years to have those conversations with her."

MySpace may not be your space, but you can help make it a safe place for your teen to hang out.