

Five Tips for Handling MySpace

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the past year or so, you've likely already heard about social networking websites such as MySpace, Xanga, and others. There have been a lot of media reports recently about such websites, specifically regarding the safety of those who use them. There have been any number of reports regarding users who have had been stalked and assaulted by predators who seek out their victims by using these sites.

Personally, I'm very conservative when it comes to this subject. My wife, Cathy, and I have decided not to allow our kids to use MySpace in our home. I believe this is a wise decision and would encourage other parents to do the same. But, I also know my kids have been on MySpace. We can't always be around them (in other kids' homes, schools or libraries), but I can and do insist that they don't access MySpace in our home. I feel like the stakes are too high and there are more than enough security concerns that make MySpace too dangerous. So, we've chosen to send a clear message to our kids that we don't want it in our home.

But, this is the reality: Social networking websites have become part of the fabric of American youth culture. Over 60% of our country's teens have used social networking websitesⁱ, and 40% maintain profiles on these sitesⁱⁱ. MySpace has over 86 million registered accountsⁱⁱⁱ and is the fourth most-visited website on the Internet, behind Yahoo, MSN and Google^{iv}. Still, parents have to make choices about whether they will allow their adolescent kids to use these websites. And, if they allow their kids access to these sites, parents must provide both boundaries and oversight to their kids' usage.

Parents must choose what they feel is right for their kids. I know that not every parent will choose what the Burns family has chosen. Many parents will allow their kids access to MySpace. And, that's why I'm writing this article. I want to give you five tips for helping you to handle MySpace should you choose to allow your kids to use it.

1. Understand What MySpace Is.

In a comprehensive article about MySpace, my friend and youth ministry colleague, Jonathan McKee, provides a great summary of what it is all about. He writes, "MySpace is a free social networking Internet service that allows anyone with a valid email to set up his or her own customized MySpace page. It is everything 'Generation @' wants. It combines blogging, instant messaging, chatting, pictures, and music downloads, all in one nicely wrapped package that's free of charge.

“Users fill out individual profiles and surveys posting everything from their birthdates, schools, favorite movies, music they listen to, and sexual preference. Friends can post immediate comments or can contact the person directly. People dialogue and make comments back and forth for all to see – it’s like an interactive reality show.”^v

2. Understand Why Your Kids Want Access to MySpace.

When we were teenagers and couldn’t hang out face-to-face with our friends, phones were the communication tools of the day. But, today’s teens now have online options such as social networking websites, instant messaging and using cell phone text messaging. Our kids find these options more to their liking than talking on the phone. They can multitask better via online methods, communicate briefly, and can’t be overheard by their parents.

Also, it’s been suggested that due to parents’ safety concerns in today’s culture, many kids don’t have the freedom to hang out with peers in settings that were common for us when we were teens. As a result, kids want access to websites like MySpace, where they can hang out “virtually” with their peers to socialize, chat, and share their thoughts.

Finally, let’s not forget the fad factor. Social networking websites are all the rage today. As noted earlier, a majority of teens use them. Very few kids want to be thought of as the “only one” who isn’t involved. They don’t want to be left out or left behind by their peers. This is a natural adolescent response.

3. Understand the Dangers of MySpace.

Just a Click Away: Mature and Inappropriate Content.

Although it is possible for kids to have a safe and positive experience on MySpace, understand that dangers lurk close by. It’s important to know that on MySpace, kids are just one or two clicks away from content that you don’t want them to view. If you were to log onto the MySpace website and start visiting profiles or clicking on ads that accompany the website, you would see that mature and inappropriate content, including what I would consider soft pornography, is just a few clicks away.

Predators on the Prowl

Because of the veil of anonymity afforded by social networking websites, predators often pose as imposters, giving false information about their age and identity, including criminal histories, in order to gain the trust of “friends.” They quite simply pretend to be someone that they are not. At some point, kids are lured into meeting the predator in person. One recent study indicates that 71% of teens have received messages from someone they don’t know, that 30% have considered meeting with a person they’ve only known through the Internet, and that 9% of 13-15 year-olds and 22% of 16-17 year-olds have actually met face-to-face with a person they had only known through the Internet.^{vi}

Experimenting

Many kids use social networking websites to experiment with different personas. If they have multiple e-mail accounts, they can set up different profiles and “try on” being someone who they are not in real life. Even if kids only have one MySpace profile, the

online setting emboldens kids to write things that they would not say in a face-to-face conversation. Sexual comments, criticisms, rants, and even cyber-bullying, are commonly-found posts on social networking websites.

4. Set Appropriate Boundaries and Provide Intentional Oversight for MySpace Usage.

Here are some practical ideas:

- ***Follow the MySpace Rules and Safety Tips and Set Privacy Settings.***

MySpace doesn't allow kids under the age of 14 to have profiles on their website. Yet, any number of kids under 14 do have MySpace accounts. How? They lie about their age when registering. MySpace has good safety tips on their website, both for users^{vii} and for parents^{viii}. If you allow your kids to have access to the site, be sure to follow these rules and tips. Additionally, when setting up a MySpace account, be sure to access the "account settings" area, click on "privacy settings" and then set the desired settings to make sure you're child's profile is private to insure only designated "friends" can access their profile.

- ***Set-up a closed circle of "friends."***

Only allow your kids to designate as "friends" people whom they know and of whom you approve. This will only allow your kids to communicate with a specific, closed group of people.

- ***Don't allow kids to add new "friends" without your permission.***

It's not unlikely that over time, your children will want to add additional "friends" to their lists. Also, understand that it's likely that your children will receive requests from people they don't know to be added to their "friend" list. Set an expectation that no person can be added to the "friend" list without your permission.

- ***Don't allow your kids to provide any personal information.***

Don't allow kids to post any information that would make it easy for a stranger to find them like addresses, phone numbers, where they regularly hang out, where they work and what time they get off work.

- ***Don't allow kids to set up additional profiles.***

From the beginning, set the expectation that your child is allowed only one account on MySpace. Make sure your child understands that a violation of this expectation is cause for disciplinary action.

- ***Make it clear that you intend to look at your child's MySpace site regularly.***

Your child will likely balk at this rule, as he or she will want the site to be private, free from a parent's view. Don't give in. This will serve a couple of good purposes, both to ensure your children think through what to post on their site before they do so, and it also gives you the opportunity to view the content that others post on the site, as well. Be sure to follow through and visit your child's MySpace site frequently.

- ***Have your kids agree to tell you if they receive any inappropriate or threatening messages.***

The possibility exists that your child will receive uninvited, inappropriate or threatening messages from others. So, set the expectation that you need to know if this occurs, so that you can deal with these messages.

5. Follow Through With Consistent Discipline.

Kids need consistent discipline from their parents in order to both survive and thrive. That means clearly defined limits, expectations and consequences clearly articulated to the children by the parents in ways that all involved parties understand. If your kids violate your boundaries, it's key to follow through consistently with the agreed upon consequences.

Further Reading on MySpace and Social Networking Websites

Much more helpful information has been written about social networking websites, such as MySpace. I hope that you'll find the time to do some further reading. Here are articles and reports that I recommend you spend some time considering:

Articles About Social Networking Websites:

Dear Diary, Dear World by Ken Mueller. Source: Center for Parent-Youth Understanding

<http://www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=122569>

Finding Teenagers Online. Source: Center for Parent-Youth Understanding

<http://www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=101385>

A Window into the "MySpace" Generation by Jonathan McKee. Source: The Source for Youth Ministry

Part 1: <http://www.thesource4ym.com/archives/arc20060214.asp>

Part 2: <http://www.thesource4ym.com/archives/arc20060221.asp#TITLE1>

MySpace in the News

Mom on MySpace (A journalist-mother writes about her experience in dealing with her daughter's use of MySpace.) Source: L.A. Times / Duluth Superior

<http://www.duluthsuperior.com/mld/duluthsuperior/living/14426432.htm>

MySpace Faces a Perp Problem Source: Wired News

<http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,70675-0.html>

Teens Putting Themselves at Risk Online Source: USA Today

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-02-05-teen-online-assaults_x.htm

ENDNOTES:

- ⁱ According to an online article, *Three in Five Teens Visit Social Networking Sites*. Source: MediaPost Publications
http://publications.mediapost.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=Articles.showArticleHomePage&art_aid=44405
- ⁱⁱ According to an online article, *E-mail? Whatever!* Source: MercuryNews.com
<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/14806164.htm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Source: Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MySpace>
- ^{iv} According to Internet traffic details provided by Alexa.com (as of 6/20/06).
- ^v Jonathan McKee, *A window into the "MySpace" Generation, Part 1*,
<http://www.thesource4ym.com/archives/arc20060214.asp>
- ^{vi} *New Study Reveals 14% of Teens Have Had Face-to-Face Meetings with People They've Met on the Internet* Source: BusinessWire
http://home.businesswire.com/portal/site/google/index.jsp?ndmViewId=news_view&newsId=20060511005101&newsLang=en
- ^{vii} *MySpace Safety Tips for Users* <http://www1.myspace.com/misc/safetyTips.html>
- ^{viii} *MySpace Safety Tips for Parents* <http://www1.myspace.com/misc/tipsForParents.html>