

MySpace® and Your Child

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Introduction

You've probably heard of MySpace, either from your kids or in the news. If you haven't heard of it, now's the time to learn about it. MySpace is the leading social networking Web site. MySpace members number in the tens of millions, many of whom are teens (including perhaps yours). Anyone 14 years of age or older can join MySpace for free. When they join, each user creates a personal profile, including their name, likes, dislikes, and even their picture. That profile is open to anyone (unless they make it private) who visits the Web site. They can also create their own private Web page where they can share additional pictures, their favorite music and videos, and, via their own their own blog, their thoughts, which they can share with a list of friends.

MySpace in the news

MySpace has been making a lot of news lately, not all of it favorable. Its user profiles and Web pages have been hacked by spammers and infected by spyware. Users have been lured to fake Web sites, where they're asked for personal or financial information. Cyber bullies intimidate users. Predators pretending to be teens have contacted users. All social networking Web sites experience similar problems, but as the most popular social networking site, MySpace draws the most attention from the press (and from the bad guys). While MySpace works to combat and minimize these threats, users must take precautions to avoid problems. And when the user is a child, parents must be vigilant too.

A primer for parents

If you're like many parents, you probably don't exactly know how MySpace works, how your kids use it, or what the dangers are. As a parent concerned for your kids' welfare, those are things that you should understand. This article will give you the basics. Then it's up to you to visit these sites, talk to your kids about how they use them, and agree on some rules.

MySpace and other social networking sites offer the same basic features: a personal profile, a blog, and interactive "friend" lists.

- **A personal profile** is a page where your child can post personal information. Typically, a profile includes the child's name, a picture, favorite activities and interests. It may also include links to a blog and to pictures and videos your child has posted. Personal profiles are open for anyone to see.

- **Blogs are online journals.** Some are topical, dedicated to a particular subject matter. Many kids use them more like traditional diaries, posting daily activities, thoughts, and feelings. Unlike diaries, blogs are meant to be shared.
- **Friend Lists** consist of those people a Web site member trusts and wishes to share extra information with. Users on a friend list have access to "private" information and the right to comment on your child's blog. Some kids have an extensive network of online friends.

Who uses social networking sites?

MySpace accounts are easy to open. They're free, and although there is a minimum age requirement, it's next to impossible for MySpace to verify a user's age and identity. Many users are younger than the minimum age. Some teens claim to be older than they are. Some predators claim to be far younger than they are.

Behavioral and security risks

Kids face a number of behavioral and security risks when they join and use social networking websites.

- **Cyber bullying** - Kids are willing to say things online that they wouldn't face-to-face. Whether your children are on the sending or receiving end of these taunts, **cyber bullying** can entangle your kids in emotionally charged conflicts.
- **Illegal behavior** - Some kids make claims with more serious consequences. Not understanding the legal implications of their actions, teens have been known to libel teachers and other adults they may have animosity toward.
- **Predators** - Sadly, adults can use these sites to seek out children and teen victims. Scanning personal profiles for favorite hangouts, addresses, and school names, they can find the kind of information they need to stalk a child.
- **Cybercrime** - Cybercriminals will trick unsuspecting users into providing personal and financial information that they can use to enrich themselves on your credit card or bank account.

How do I keep my kids safe?

It's possible to disable your child's MySpace account. You can also search the Web to find out what they post on their pages. However, your kids may feel you've broken trust with them-and it's much too easy for your kids to open another account without your knowledge. Communication, trust building, and education are a more effective alternative.

Rules for your kids

Ask your kids to give you access to their profiles and blogs. Get their consent to let you review them from time to time-including their private areas. Then, encourage your kids to follow these basic rules.

- **Don't post too much information** that could identify you or your location, including your last name, your school, where you live, where you spend time, your phone number or email address.
- **Use your site's privacy features** to limit personal posts to people you know and trust. Don't add people to your trusted list unless you know exactly who they are. Remove "friends" who post mean or untrue comments, or information that compromises your security.
- **Don't meet people you don't know.** Unless you can confirm exactly who they are, never agree to meet online friends in person. And even if you can confirm their identity, take precautions by meeting in a public, group setting.
- **Don't post suggestive pictures** or images that might give strangers clues about your identity or location. These pictures compromise your security, and they may affect how relatives, future employers, and even college admissions counselors perceive you.
- **Monitor your blog** for compromising information your friends may have added. Delete anything you don't want people to see, and consider removing offending posters from your friend list.
- **Don't lie about your age.** Acting older than you are can put you in dangerous situations. If you don't meet the age requirement, look for sites like Live Journal™, which offer lower age requirements and a safer environment.
- **Don't ever provide financial information** online without first checking with your parents, even on Web sites that appear to be legitimate. They may be fake or "phishing" Web sites that exist only to steal your information.
- **What you say on a social networking site may become public** even if you post it in a private area. Don't use your account to spread rumors or disclose personal information about others. Your actions could have serious implications for you and your parents.

Your child's safety starts with you

Online socializing has given kids a new and exciting way to interact with the world. It has also redefined traditional notions of privacy and behavior. You need to work with your kids to make sure they understand the pitfalls, so their online experience is not only safe and trouble-free, but the enriching social experience it can be.

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