

THE INTERNET

The Web continues to change daily, to be increasingly multimedia, social and mobile. Opportunities for social networking are seemingly limitless. According to an October, 2005 survey by the Polly Klass Foundation, 50% of teens, ages 13-18, frequently communicate on the Internet with someone they have never met. Children aged 8-12 are increasing their online presence, but are still concerned about safety, whereas teens aged 13-18 are taking more and more risks. According to a Justice Department study, one in seven children using the Internet has been sexually solicited and one in three has been exposed to unwanted sexual material. One in eleven has been harassed. What can be done to keep children safe? Parents need to be aware of what children are doing online at all times.

Social Networking Sites—What Are They?

According to Jon Gibs, senior director of media at Nielson/Net Ratings, “Social networking sites are the reality television of the Internet.” Sites such as MySpace allow users to create self-profiles at no cost. Profiles are designed to attract responses. Anyone can search the site and contact a member based on the information in the profile. Information and pictures contained in the profile may not be an accurate representation of the member.

For example, members have been known to misrepresent age, physical characteristics, interests, etc. As of April 2006, MySpace had a growth rate of 367% from April 2005 to April 2006. Blogger, another popular site for children and teens, grew 80%. Not only did these social networking sites have tremendous growth in one year, they also have extremely high retention rates due to their interactive nature. Parents must take an active role in protecting their children if these sites are used.

General Parent Guidelines

1. Learn about the Internet. Ask your children to show you how they use the Internet. You will get a sense of their interest by sitting with your children and visiting their favorite sites.
2. Learn how to check what your children do online. There are several good sites that can teach parents how to track use, such as www.linkupparents.com
3. Learn how to use monitoring and blocking software. Be aware that even the best software can be circumvented.
4. Learn what resources your computer system offers beyond monitoring software.
5. Talk to your children frequently about online dangers including sexual victimization.
6. Tell your children that what they see online may or may not be true.

For Parents of Children Aged 8- 12

1. Keep the computer in a public place with the screen facing outward.
2. Establish family rules and guidelines to include:
 - a. no personal information given.
 - b. no school information disclosed.
 - c. review of pictures to be posted.
3. Reinforce the dangers of and penalties for sharing personal or school information. Many schools have policies against students posting information about the school, including the school name, teacher names, etc.
4. Prohibit any meeting in person with someone he/she knows only online, unless you are present.
5. Inform your children that you will monitor Internet use, IM (instant messaging), and email in order to keep them safe.