THE INTERNET, SOCIAL NETWORKING AND TELEPHONE USE

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.

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.

For Parents of Teenagers Aged 13-17

1. Share stories using real examples of teens who have been tricked or hurt because of unsafe online practices.

2. Meeting someone contacted online carries considerable risk and is not advised. If a meeting is arranged adhere to the following:

   a. do not meet alone.
   b. go with a trusted adult.
   c. meet in a public place.
   d. if not what you expected, walk away and tell a parent or trusted adult.

3. Review pictures that your child wants to post.

4. Do not overreact if and when you find out that your teen has done something online of which you do not approve, but correct the child.

5. Reinforce the expectation that parents monitor Internet use and that safety rules must be followed.

6. If your teen confides in you about something scary or inappropriate that he or she encountered online, your first response should not be to take away Internet privileges. Instead, attempt to be supportive of your child and find solutions to help prevent this from happening in the future.

Tips for Teenagers

1. Protect yourself. Keep your identity private—no name, address, school name, phone number, family or friend information should be given out or posted.

2. Remember when you are online, anyone can see and read what you post. Consider who might see your online profile—friends, teachers, parents, coaches, employers, the police, the FBI, even sex offenders.

3. Meeting someone in person who was contacted by you online or who contacted you online carries considerable risk to your safety and is not advised. Always obtain parent permission first.

4. Be careful about pictures you post online that can make it easy for people to recognize you.

Tips for Teenagers on Cell Phone Use

1. Be careful about the pictures you take and send with your phone. Pictures taken with a cell phone can be posted on the web.

2. Be aware text messaging reveals your phone number to whomever you send a message.

3. Know that predators can also send messages and call to arrange meetings.

4. If you receive a bullying or threatening text message, report it immediately to a parent or trusted adult.

5. Your phone has caller ID. Do not answer a call from a number that you are not familiar with or not expecting.

6. Parents should review their service plan to learn which features can be blocked to protect children.