

The Dangers of the Internet

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If you have a teen or pre-teen, chances are, you have found them on the Internet on one of the many popular networking sites that have taken the world by storm. From all outward appearances, these sites for communicating with family and friends look fun and inviting. And they truly are. But it is crucial for you and your teen to be well informed on the dangers that lurk beneath the surface of the cyber waves.

Blogs are social networking sites and on-line journals that are posted on the world-wide web for all to see. Your words, thoughts, and message can be broadcast from anywhere in the world. It truly is a world community at your fingertips. If you have access to the Internet, this information is for you.

Three of the most popular sites you may recognize are www.myspace.com, www.zanga.com, and www.facebook.com. There are thousands of social networking sites in addition to these. When you become a registered user, you can creatively and interactively post anything you want: photos, daily thoughts or musings, user profiles, and also be a part of an internal e-mail system. These sites have become increasingly influential in the teenage culture.

Four Unforgiving Fallacies:

- *I am safe because I only talk to my friends.* Adults pretend to be teenagers. Teens pretend to be adults. Most teens cannot imagine a 30-58 year old trolling their site, but it is very real. You can be anyone you want to be, any age without anyone knowing the real you. The flip side, any one else can pose as well. MySpace is the fourth most popular website and says it is strictly a social networking site for the 14-24 year-old age group. Unfortunately, the news has run rampant this year of adult sexual predators baiting and luring minors through these networks. Although each of these sites seek to monitor and keep it safe, it is virtually impossible! MySpace has over 88 million registered users involved and only 250 employees, with only one third of those employees monitoring the site. Other sites have very similar statistics. As of June 2006, new security measures were set in place where the "over 18 year old" users cannot request to be on a 14-15 year-old's list. EVEN SO, these measures rely on "honesty" in an arena where most users are dishonest to some degree. There is no measure to verify that users are submitting their true age when registering.
- *I don't give any personal information out.* Most users don't know they are giving valuable and very personal information out for the world to see. Fact is, it is practically impossible not to unless you are living in a fantasy world. Personal facts can be located through a friend's site or in giving out simple and seemingly innocuous info like sports teams they like or play for, family names, who they work for, email addresses, etc. A predator is a professional who can maneuver and manipulate information seemingly from thin air. I have been amazed and frightened at the amount of personal info I have found on our MKs around the world on their blogs. Simply by clicking from friend to friend, I can have a wealth of information about them at my disposal.

- *I have deleted anything questionable and incriminating.* Deleting information doesn't necessarily mean it is gone. It is possible that whatever you have posted at any point has been linked and will forever be in cyberspace. The Wall Street Journal came out with an article this year that states that an increasing number of colleges, employers and private schools are denying applicants because of a student's web or blog sites. Likewise, an ABC World News Tonight report recently highlighted the extremely real consequences of some student's participation in these internet bloggings and websites. Evidence of poor character, immoral activity or speech, and suggestive photographs can come back to haunt a student and cause the loss of admission or employment. Many colleges are requiring the applicant to provide links to their personal websites.
- *My financial information on my computer is safe.* The newest alarm to be raised with these websites is the risks in personal and financial information used by hackers. Users unknowingly become a "friend" to someone who is "phishing" for account information and who can attach a worm to a JPEG photo in their scrapbook or something else such as a widget. The malicious codes attached or account information gleaned can take years to overcome.

Vigilance by parents and education for your teens plays a tremendous role in keeping your kids safe. Monitor your kids' web and blog sites. The Josh McDowell principle of "Trust but Verify" comes into play here. If your teens don't want you to see it, then you better dig deeper. You can learn a lot about your teen and their friends by their sites. Make yourself available to talk and address any concerns you might have with the issues in a positive way. Affirm and love them in the process of holding them accountable for their own safety's sake. Newly introduced, www.battlecry.com is a Christian site by Teen Mania ministries dedicated to connecting teens, youth groups, and youth leaders to each other and content that will challenge and help them grow in their faith.

Three other internet resources to check into:

- www.pureintimacy.org - This one has been developed by Focus on the Family in the USA and has a section for parents, couples, and ministry leaders. This site helps to explain more in the understanding of the dynamics and seriousness of the problem, as well as encouraging all of us with realistic expectations of the best way to tackle things.
- www.covenanteyes.com - This introduces a program of accountability, rather than an internet filter. It suggests that if you have children, you may want to have both a filter AND the accountability system. The accountability system is good for developing discipline, since the accountability partners will have a list of every site visited. It further suggests that filter systems are easily disabled by most computer savvy people (as many of our children are). This is certainly true, since our filter system of the past obviously did not work.
- www.settingcaptivesfree.com - the general website offers online courses for overcoming several different addictions. This offers a 60 day course called, "The Way of Purity". This resource is available in multiple languages.

Recently Released: MySpace has developed a monitoring application called Zephyr that although parents will not be able to view the content posted on MySpace, it will keep them informed every time a profile is updated. The program will also let monitored users know they are being watched. Unfortunately, this may lead teens to move to other social networking sites where they know their parents can't monitor them. At this point, it is too early to rate the effectiveness of Zephyr and see the outcomes.

Above all, stay on top of educating yourself to the new lures and trends in Internet safety. It is a continually changing, fun, yet dangerous wave. Your teen is likely to be more savvy than you on the computer, yet naïve when it comes to the pitfalls and dangers. Keep yourself on the cutting edge and communicate with your teen. They will respect you for it.