

## **Keeping our Kids Safe on the Internet**

**Please see the links at the bottom of this page for some helpful online links and resources.**

© 2006 Newsweek, Inc.  
Susanna Schrobsdorff  
Newsweek Jan. 27, 2006

What's your child posting online? Experts recommend that parents monitor how much information their kids reveal about themselves.

MySpace and similar sites like Xanga are extremely popular among teens and young adults who post profiles, photos and blogs—often chock-full of revealing personal details for all the world (including predators) to see.

NEWSWEEK's Susanna Schrobsdorff spoke to Monique Nelson, executive vice president of Web Wise Kids, a nonprofit Internet safety organization based in Santa Ana, Calif., about how parents can reduce the risks for kids on social-networking sites. Excerpts:

### **NEWSWEEK: Why can sites like MySpace be so risky for teens?**

Monique Nelson: Kids just don't get it that there are real people beyond the screen—not just their friends. They post private information and they don't understand that a predator could be looking at it and tracking them. They are naive and vulnerable. They think, "Nothing bad is going to happen to me," just like we did when we were young.

### **What makes the social-networking sites more dangerous than regular Web pages?**

It's one-stop shopping. You have the profile and instant messaging right there. These networking sites are a perfect predator's playground. Predators don't have to go to chat rooms, they can troll through and look for pretty faces that they like and get all the information they want. The police we work with tell us that when a predator starts grooming a child, he looks for vulnerability, and with a diary or blog right there, he's already gotten past the first stage.

### **Is there any way to know how big a problem this is?**

No, because the kids aren't telling. Sometimes they don't even tell mom and dad that they have a space [online]. Maybe they're underage, and if they tell, guess what mom and dad will do? Take away the page. We've done surveys of kids ages 12-15 and asked them if they had ever been sexually harassed online, and most of them said they had been, but they never tell their parents. [According to Highlights of the Youth Internet Safety Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, "One in five children, 10 to 17 years old, receive unwanted sexual solicitations online."]

**The sites say they have minimum age requirements. On MySpace it's 14,**

## **but is there any way to check?**

There's really not a way to check their online profile. The sites have some moderators, but there are not very many, and with that many people on there, it's hard. I believe many of the kids lie and are underage.

## **What kinds of revealing information do kids post?**

Even if they don't post their address, they don't understand that if they have pictures of themselves in front of their school sign or the place where they work it could lead someone to them. That very thing happened with my granddaughter—she had a shirt with the logo of the coffee shop and the city where she worked. She just didn't think that right there she had given away some private information. And she's not little, she's 19, and she's had a grandma that's talked to her about this for 10 years.

## **How can parents who don't know a lot about the Internet keep their kids safe?**

Every parent should do some homework. Find out what your child's online aliases are. And, if you don't know about this stuff, let your kid teach you. It's a perfect time to sit down with them and let them show you. A really direct approach is to restrict Internet access to times when parents are home. You can do that with a password system. Almost every safety expert recommends that the computer be in the family room where parents can see it, but guess where most kids have their computers? Their room. Parents can also install monitoring software which can track where the kid goes and what they are typing. FilterReview.com is a great Web site that reviews the different monitoring software for parents.

## **How can parents inform older kids who may be using computers outside the home?**

One way to impress upon them is to discuss some of these cases where bad things have happened so that it hits home and becomes real to them. Because most kids, if you talk to them will say: "Oh, please, that happens to other people."

Some parents worry about invading their child's privacy with monitoring software or by reading their Web diaries.

In my house, I say it's a dictatorship—sorry. MySpace is a privilege; a computer is a privilege. A parent needs to be a parent and that may mean using monitoring software.

## **How does your organization train parents and kids about Web safety?**

We use computer games to teach kids about predators and online bullying—which is also a problem. We have one called "Missing" based on a true story of a boy that was lured by an Internet predator. Kids take the role of a police agent, the missing kid and the parents, and the goal is to find the boy. That way they understand the language that a predator uses and the kinds of things they do to trap kids. It's all streaming video, not cartoons, so the kids really connect with it. We've reached 1.3 million kids ages 12-15, and we have a new one this year for high-school kids. [The game and other safety information for parents and schools is available via <http://www.webwisekids.org/>.]

© 2006 Newsweek, Inc.  
Susanna Schrobsdorff  
Newsweek Jan. 27, 2006

[Child Safety on the Information Highway](#)

[Project SafeKids](#)

[Web Wise Kids](#)

[Filter Review \(filtering/blocking or monitoring systems \)](#)

[Missing and Exploited Children](#)

[A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety](#)