

COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

Teach kids to be safe on MySpace.com

It seems like every day I read articles about social networking sites like MySpace.com that send chills down my spine. Likewise, I also overhear teenagers discussing life with MySpace lingo seamlessly woven into their conversations.

Frustrated Information Age parents and educators now have even more to worry about when it comes to their children's safety. The generation gap between us and early-technology-adopter teens seems to grow wider by the minute.

Internet predators are using the social media site MySpace.com to seduce young victims, and yet it grows by 250,000 new members each day. MySpace is a phenomenon that doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon. Last year, Rupert Murdoch's media powerhouse News Corp. bought MySpace.com for \$580 million.

The truth of the matter is this: Tech-savvy kids, and most of them are, will not abandon this social enabler just because we "don't get it."

MySpace.com enables anyone to build his own homepage for free, list their likes, dislikes, favorite bands, top books, best movies, general interests,



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relationship status, etc., and then connect with other like-minded people. This 21st century, online diary can be a brilliant environment for the Internet generation to reflect.

Many moments of clarity are discovered while viewing the world through the eyes of our "friends." Kids are adding dimensions of life experience we never would have dreamed of pre-World Wide Web.

How do we help teens find sanity in this new craze? In order to define how Web log/social networking sites should be used safely, we must expose their ill-intentioned purposes. It's my hope that we can keep an open dialogue with our kids about their online habits and teach them what this trend is not.

It's not Lie-Space. MySpace requires its members to be at least 14 to use the site. Projecting an image that's based in a lie undermines the essential beauty of the Web log. Sites like MySpace.com have given us the opportunity to explore real ideas with real people from real places we may never have con-

nected with before. Our dreams, passions, creativity and brilliance are exciting enough; there's no need to make stuff up.

It's not Buy-Space. Just the thought of 50 million members interacting in one cybermarket makes advertisers drool. Watch out! Salespeople from every industry are using this medium to hawk their wares. They know this generation annually spends a few hundred billion dollars on their identities. Teach them to be on guard against manipulative sales tactics disguised in innocent conversation.

It's not Spy-Space. The hottest commodity of the Internet Age is our personal information. There's no "morning after" software that will protect us from an indiscreet online encounter. Mistakes with our personal info are, at best, a credit-ruining headache and, at worst, a life-ending victimization. It can't be communicated enough: Share your screen name, share your thoughts, share all of the poetry and artistry of your life, but for heaven's sake, never post your personal information or things that will embarrass you later.

A quick visit to MySpace.com is the first step to disarming the misconcep-

tions surrounding this pervasive trend. Beware: It is shocking. You'll see people using the site to unleash their most vulgar depravities into cyberspace.

Perhaps, because of recent negative press, it looks like MySpace has started to clean up its act. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Advertising Council and MySpace recently teamed to promote online safety. According to an April 10 news release, public service advertisements will run on News Corp.'s outlets including television, the Internet, and newspapers.

But that doesn't relieve us of our responsibility as adults to discuss with our kids what they are doing on the computer. Make every effort to understand this new wave of socializing and teach kids how to be safe and wise.

The Golden Rule must be amended for the 21st century: Always do to others what you would have them do to you and never do online what you wouldn't do in real life.

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