

## **Juveniles and Social Networking on the Internet**

Let's face it, social networking websites are here to stay... so is text messaging...so is gaming with web connectivity. Five years ago the police would have advised that no juvenile should ever connect to a social networking site. We realize now that it is impractical to restrict young adults from all technology-related activities. Now is the time to educate yourself on the proper use of these social networking websites.

### **What is a social networking site?**

A social networking site is a combination of a yearbook and a diary. The users can post photos of themselves, listen to music, chat live with their friends, search for others and list their interests. Many of the sites also allow the user to list their marital status and their location. Users can also make comments and postings on other people's pages; like a blog. Most juveniles use the sites to display information and photos for their friends to look at and comment on. The juveniles talk to one another using the real time chat option or they send messages to be viewed at a later time, similar to an e-mail. Users connect with one another by requesting access to their friend's profiles. The profiles can be set to private, so anyone searching the site would only see the username and a photo (if the user posts one). Users request access to others profiles and if accepted, they can view the entire page.

Popular social networking sites include MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. The benefit to these sites is that they allow the user to search for people they may have lost touch with or send messages to multiple users. The sites are widely used to discover new music or connect with others with similar interests. However, if not used responsibly, social networking sites can become a huge problem for juveniles.

### **It seems innocent, how does trouble occur?**

Often times juveniles do not think about what they are posting online. Posting personal information can lead to extreme danger. These websites can be viewed by anyone in the world. Social networking sites have been linked to kidnappings, murders, child pornography, gang and drug activity, bullying, blackmail and sexual assault. A recent news report indicated that MySpace had identified and removed 90,000 registered sex offenders from the website!

### **The following is a list of tips for users to follow when utilizing a social networking website:**

- Do not post provocative photos, even if you are over 18 years of age.
- Give your real age when signing up. Most sites have age requirements. If you do not meet them, then you should not be on the site.

- Do not post personal information such as sports teams you belong to, bands you like and hobbies. Of course, you should never post your address or phone number. Even the most inexperienced predator can use personal information to find you or gain your trust.
- Set your page to private. Never let anyone onto your page that you don't know.
- Never use the site for dating purposes.
- Set a display name (screen name) that is not your actual name. Instead, make up a generic name such as "123girl." Do not use any information in your display name that indicates personal interests or location such as "SoccerLover123" or "SanDiegoGal."
- Never say anything online that you wouldn't say to someone's face. Also, never post anything that you would be embarrassed for your parents to see. Remember that anyone can look at the sites, including colleges and employers.
- Do not post your school name or mascot. This shows predators where you are in the world.
- If someone threatens you or makes you uncomfortable while on the site, tell an adult and report the abuse to the website. Most sites have a section where you can report misuse.
- If you are being bullied by someone, it is important to tell a parent or guardian. Make sure to print the messages.

**The following is a list of precautions parents must take to protect their children online:**

- Talk to them about their online activities.
- Ask to see their online profiles.
- Keep the computer in an open living room or kitchen, so your children are not behind closed doors while using the internet. Make the screen face the open room so it is not hidden from view.
- Many times children make more than one profile page. Ensure that you have access to all of them.
- Do not allow your children to lie about their age online.
- Their online profile should not be treated like a diary. It's your house and your computer, you have every right to view their online activities.
- Check your browser's history and look at the websites your children have visited.
- Create your own profile so you can become familiar with the site your child is using. Request to be allowed on your child's page as a "friend." If your child is embarrassed that their friends will see that their parent is on their page, use a picture of an inanimate object or a celebrity for your profile.
- Encourage your child to tell you about any online contacts that make them uncomfortable. Report any online abuse to authorities.
- Know more than your child about the computer. Take classes, read articles, and explore the features on the computer.

### **Just for informational purposes:**

There are several websites that tell teens how to set up profiles on social networking sites without their parent's knowledge. By being armed with this information, you can better protect your children. Some of the tips given by these sites are:

- Don't let your computer save your passwords.
- Don't tell your siblings that you have an online profile.
- Make sure your friends don't tell their parents that you have an online profile.
- Use a free e-mail service to make a secret e-mail account that your parents don't know about.
- Delete the history in the browser every time you use the computer. However, don't delete everything because it will look suspicious.
- Keep the volume low on your speakers.
- Make sure you close the door while you are using the computer. If your parents require that you leave the door open, close it halfway and put something loud (like a bell or beads) on the door so you are alerted when someone is entering the room.
- Develop quick reflexes in order to close out of the page quickly, if needed.
- Have other applications open so that you can easily hide the page on the computer desktop.
- Don't talk about the website in front of your parents or use a code word for it.

It is imperative that you stay one step ahead of your child on the internet. Teach them the proper use of the internet, rather than *them* teaching *you*.

### **Additional Resources:**

[www.cyberbully411.com](http://www.cyberbully411.com)

[www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org)

[www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)

<http://tcs.cybertipline.com>

[www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)

[www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)

[www.ice.gov](http://www.ice.gov)

[www.sdpolicefoundation.org](http://www.sdpolicefoundation.org)

### **New Laws:**

As of January 2009, the following laws went into effect in California:

273i. (a) Any person who publishes information describing or depicting a child, the physical appearance of a child, the location of a child, or locations where children may be found with the intent that another person imminently use the information to commit a crime against a child and the information is likely to aid in the imminent commission of a crime against a child, is guilty of a misdemeanor,

punishable by imprisonment in a county jail for not more than one year, a fine of not more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000), or by both a fine and imprisonment.

(b) For purposes of this section, "publishes" means making the information available to another person through any medium, including, but not limited to, the Internet, the World Wide Web, or e-mail.

(c) For purposes of this section, "child" means a person who is 14 years of age or younger.

(d) For purposes of this section, "information" includes, but is not limited to, an image, film, filmstrip, photograph, negative, slide, photocopy, videotape, video laser disc, or any other computer-generated image.

(e) Any parent or legal guardian of a child about whom information is published in violation of subdivision (a) may seek a preliminary injunction enjoining any further publication of that information.

**653.2.** (a) Every person who, with intent to place another person in reasonable fear for his or her safety, or the safety of the other person's immediate family, by means of an electronic communication device, and without consent of the other person, and for the purpose of imminently causing that other person unwanted physical contact, injury, or harassment, by a third party, electronically distributes, publishes, e-mails, hyperlinks, or makes available for downloading, personal identifying information, including, but not limited to, a digital image of another person, or an electronic message of a harassing nature about another person, which would be likely to incite or produce that unlawful action, is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in the county jail, by a fine of not more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000), or by both that fine and imprisonment.

(b) For purposes of this section, the term "electronic communication device" includes, but is not limited to, telephones, cell phones, computers, Internet Web pages or sites, Internet phones, hybrid cellular/Internet/wireless devices, personal digital assistants (PDAs), video recorders, fax machines, or pagers.

"Electronic communication" has the same meaning as the term is defined in Section 2510(12) of Title 18 of the United States **Code**.

(c) For purposes of this section, the following terms apply:

(1) "Harassment" means a knowing and willful course of conduct directed at a specific person that a reasonable person would consider as seriously alarming, seriously annoying, seriously tormenting, or seriously terrorizing the person and that serves no legitimate purpose.

(2) "Of a harassing nature" means information that a reasonable person would consider as seriously alarming, seriously annoying,

seriously tormenting, or seriously terrorizing the person and that serves no legitimate purpose.

If you have any additional questions about internet safety, please call Heather Lindquist at the La Mesa Police Department's Crime Prevention Unit  
(619) 667-1445