

As teens flock to MySpace, parents exposed to potential perils



By Bobby Ross Jr.
The Christian Chronicle

A teenager named Abby loves MySpace.com, a social networking Web site that lets her — and its roughly 100 million other users — stay in touch with friends.

The 14-year-old daughter of a minister in the Northeast said she's cautious about the personal information she shares online, never revealing her full name, school or hometown.

"I just don't put myself in those type of harmful situations," she said.

But Abby said some of her friends' parents would be shocked by the specific details, pictures, foul language and inappropriate music posted on their children's MySpace pages. "I definitely don't think some parents are educated enough on this subject," she told *The Christian Chronicle*.

It's a problem that churches and Christian schools have started to address, offering seminars, educational materials and other training to help parents understand and monitor the potential dangers — physical and spiritual.

"We demand to know who they are going to eat pizza with, who's driving, where they are going afterwards ... yet we are reluctant to ask who they are talking to on the Internet?" said Jimmy Ellison, a 23-year law enforcement veteran who is chief of police at Abilene Christian University in Texas. "There is probably more risk from that Internet conversation with a stranger than there is in your teenager going out with friends for a pizza."

Increasingly, children ages 10 to 17 are bombarded with online porn and harassed and bullied on the Internet, according to a recent national study by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. Despite the rise of social networking sites, though, a smaller percentage of young people are being sexually solicited than five years ago, the study found.

Ellison, whose son attends Abilene Christian Schools, addressed students on Internet safety at a recent chapel service.

The school also asked parents to discuss MySpace with their children and view their personal Web pages with them, school president Bill Brant said. A filter was installed to prevent MySpace access at school.

"As is true of any tool, technology can and should be used for good," Brant said. But as often happens, he said, "The devil has a head start in regard to what MySpace can be used for."

Nonetheless, Michael Matthew Mercer, youth and family minister at the Highland church in Abilene, said he sees great ministry potential: "MySpace is used by the secular world to promote concerts, TV shows, political propaganda and more. Christian teenagers could use MySpace to promote social justice, spiritual formation, mission opportunities and God's glory."

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Dale Horn, superintendent of Crowley's Ridge Academy, a Church of Christ school in Paragould, Ark., said social networking sites such as MySpace, Xanga and Facebook offer what students perceive as an anonymous environment.

It's free of parents, teachers, ministers and other adults, so students feel comfortable freely expressing themselves, Horn said.

"However, as they become more and more comfortable with sharing personal bytes of their lives, the 'anonymous site' becomes more of an open-book biography of their deep personal lives and secrets," Horn said.

Crowley's Ridge has encouraged parents to be more involved with their children's Internet use, prompting some to move computers to living rooms and kitchens, he said.

But other parents still allow children to use computers in their bedrooms, which Horn said frightens him.

Even a good kid may encounter a bad person online, Ellison said. For example, a high school girl may post a picture of herself leaning against her new car. If a predator looks hard enough, he might be able to see the license plate number on the car. Then he could go to any number of public Web sites to find her home address.

Scariest of all, Ellison said: Most students post detailed enough profile information to make it "excessively easy" for predators to hunt them down.

"An online predator has no preference if his or her next victim is a naive churchgoer or Christian-schooled victim versus someone who has never darkened the door of a church or who may have less attentive parents," Ellison said. "The predator is just looking for a victim."

'YOU NEED TO KNOW'

At the Memorial Road church in Oklahoma City, two recent seminars on Internet safety drew more than 100 parents each.

Church member Kim Carter, an Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agent, urged parents to establish rules for Internet use and treat online activity as if their children were going out at night with friends. He pointed to two sites that offer safety resources: www.NetSmartz.org and www.missingkids.com.

Carter, who heads Oklahoma's Internet Crimes Against Children task force, also advised parents to make sure their children feel free to tell them if something happens online that makes them uncomfortable or scared. "You need to know if they are being solicited by a possible pedophile or they are the target of cyber-bullying," said Carter, adding that the child is not to blame if something like that happens, so the first response should not be to ban him from the Internet.

At the same time, Carter said, parents should recognize that sometimes it's "our kids" caught cyber-bullying or engaging in other inappropriate behavior.

"It is not uncommon for my agency to get notified that a teenage girl has been posting photos of her exposed breasts on the Internet," he said. "The child is convinced that there is no way it can be traced back to her, so maybe on a dare from friends, they post the picture, being careful not to show their face. They are really surprised when one of my agents knocks on their door and begins talking to the parents about the kid's actions."

POWER FOR GOOD, AND EVIL

If a teen has a "secret life" online, it's not MySpace's fault, in former police officer Josh Jeffery's view.

Jeffery, a volunteer youth minister at the Southeast church in Milwaukie, Ore., said most of the teens in his youth group have MySpace pages.

"I have MySpace as well, and they all know it," Jeffery said. "I've added them all as friends, and I send them messages. I think it helps keep their pages appropriate because they know they have a fellow adult Christian that sees what they do."

Abby said she may not always seem appreciative of her mother checking up on her Internet activity, but she's glad her parents want to keep her safe.

"The more you abuse the power you have on the Internet, the more danger you put yourself in," she said.

Oct. 1, 2006

Note: Related Editorial — *Teenagers' diaries no longer come with locks and keys. Nor are they hidden in drawers or under pillows to keep prying eyes from uncovering their secrets. Read [Connecting teens and wisdom online](#)*

Online exclusives —

'What is this thing called MySpace?' Read Youth Minister Michael Matthew Mercer's thoughts on [MySpace and ministry](#)

'... no one is insulated from this danger.' Read a [Q&A with church member and law enforcement agent Kim Carter](#)