



## **Minding the MySpace Dangers**

Talking to your children, even your adult children, about the dangers of posting personal information on the Internet is a must. Social-networking sites, like the extremely popular MySpace.com, can be a fun way to interact with friends and family. But most members don't realize that they could be exposing themselves to very dangerous and disturbed people.

MySpace has exploded, claiming millions of members. It's easy to use, and it has mass. Anyone can join. But it's particularly popular with those in their early teens to late 20s. Because of its size, problems with pedophiles and lack of controls, it has developed a negative reputation.

So, let's look at MySpace. Anyone 14 and over can get a free account. All it takes is a valid e-mail address. However, there is no verification of a person's age. Once you sign up, you can customize your profile page.

Profile pages typically contain personal information. Songs, pictures, comments and friends' comments often are included.

Most importantly, there is a section to list friends who are also on MySpace. You can point MySpace to your AOL, Gmail, Hotmail or Yahoo! address book to see if anyone you know has registered with the site. MySpace will list any members in your address book.

From that list you can send a friend request. The member receiving the friend request must approve it in order to be linked as friends. But you can also find new friends by searching MySpace's database for people with similar interests.

The member search function offers a quick way to locate registered users based on information they list in their profile. You can search by gender, age, marital status, location, ethnicity, body type, height, education, orientation, religion, income and even preference to having children. Obviously, this has great potential for someone seeking 15-year-old children.

A random search is an eye-opener for most parents. Underage members post pictures of themselves with friends drinking beer. Others write about their experiences with drugs. Frank and sexually explicit comments appear on friends' profile pages.

If you have teenagers, they may well have MySpace pages. Ask to see them. Objectionable pictures or comments can be removed. If your child is under 14, have the pro-

file removed. Click the contact link at the bottom of the MySpace page. Complete the form and include your child's URL.

Your children must understand that anyone can see the information they post. Many youngsters have no concept that millions of people can see what they post. They also may not understand that anyone can pretend to be someone else. According to the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, each week an average of 50 children fall prey to online predators. This statistic is not limited to MySpace users, but covers the Web as a whole.

Young adults also make mistakes on these sites. I know of a case in which an employer checked job applicants on a Web site. He hired a person at a lower salary than he expected to pay. Why? She was the picture of confidence in her interview. But, on her page, she said she desperately needed the job.

Although MySpace and other sites like it can be a fun experience, remind your children that what gets posted on the Internet can have far-reaching consequences. The Web is a great communications device. But the dangers are undeniable. Parents must tackle this before something terrible happens.

The Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported more than 1,200 incidents last year of adults using the Internet to entice children. With numbers like that, you'd think parents would be hovering over their kids, wanting to know what they're doing online. But authorities say many parents are clueless about their kids' MySpace profiles.