

The doors are locked. The windows shut. You feel safe, but you should not. Predators are getting into your home, stalking your children, and learning intimate details of their everyday life, even seeing their pictures - through the computer.

It is true that the computer is a wonderful technological break through. It has made life faster, easier and research time has been cut in half. We all know that everything can be found on the Internet. While the computer is a convenience that is a permanent part of our lives, it can also be a danger to our children.

We have all taught our children "Don't talk to strangers", but we have never had to worry about the stranger being in our living rooms or our children bedrooms. The worst part is that our children often times are inviting them in their rooms.

Children online

Children of all ages use computers and go online.

Among children between the ages 10 and 17 using the Internet:

- The U.S. Department of Justice estimates 77 million children were active on the Internet as of June 2005.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

- One in four had an unwanted exposure to sexually explicit pictures.
- About one in five received a sexual solicitation.
- Those numbers are believed to be even higher in 2006.

How are these predators getting to our children? Through websites made by children, there is a flurry of new website allowing children to post their own personal blog.

A personal blog is an online diary or journal, such as MySpace.com or LiveJournal. It is a format where teenagers (13 years and up) post their feelings, their frustrations, desire, wants and needs. They post their views on other people as well. They post pictures of themselves dress in daring outfits and sometime in nothing at all.

Online diaries have become a daily routine for many teens and college students. They post notes for their friends and others who share a common interest. Teens view it as a way to keep up with one another every day lives.

The problem is that the children mistakenly believe that only their friends will read their blogs. What part of World Wide Web did they not understand?

Predators online

Child sex predators spend hours learning how to communicate with children online, according to Police Department reports. They realize that sites such as MySpace, LiveJournal are an open invitation to the children's lives.

According to police, the predators study information to be knowledgeable about the latest youth trends, including music. They know the language of young people, their favorite TV shows, interests and hobbies. They also:

- Keep notebooks on our children.
- Locate a child online and turn to the appropriate page in the notebook.
- Try to become that child's best friend.

What is MySpace.com?

It is a site of social networking for people to post blogs, user profiles and email address. It has up to 180,000 new members joining daily, according to MySpace.com. It is the world's fifth most popular English-language site.

According to a recent article in USA Today, **“What you say online could haunt you”**
By Janet Kornblum and Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

As more and more students turn to websites such as Facebook and [MySpace](#) to chronicle their lives and socialize with friends, they also are learning that their words and pictures are reaching way beyond the peers for whom they were intended. And some, like Guinn, are paying a price. In the past few months, college, high school and even middle school students across the USA have been suspended or expelled, thrown off athletic teams, passed over for jobs and even arrested based on their online postings.

Students post pictures of themselves holding cans of beer and bottles of liquor — even when they're underage. They pose suggestively wearing little — sometimes no — clothing. Some appear to be smoking marijuana in bongs or joints, even holding firearms. They openly write nasty comments about each other or their teachers and coaches online.

To teens and young adults, social websites are private spaces where they can interact in the open, multimedia style of the online world in which they grew up. But to adults, these sites are places where kids are naively putting their reputations and futures — not to mention personal safety — at risk.

Disparaging the college

A few examples:

- Admissions dean Paul Marthers at Reed College in Portland, Ore., says the school denied admission this year to one applicant in part because his entries on blogging site [LiveJournal](#) included disparaging comments about Reed.
- In Costa Mesa, Calif., 20 students were suspended last month from TeWinkle Middle School for two days for participating in a MySpace group where one student allegedly threatened to kill another and made anti-Semitic slurs. The student accused of making the threat could face criminal charges and expulsion, says Bob Metz, assistant superintendent of the Newport-Mesa Unified School District.
- A 16-year-old boy in Jefferson, Colo., was arrested after police say he showed pictures of himself on his MySpace page holding handguns. Police subsequently found the same weapons in his home, says Jim Shires of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. The boy has been charged with three misdemeanors for being a juvenile in possession of handguns, says Pam Russell of the district attorney's office.
- Two Louisiana State swimmers were kicked off the team last spring for criticizing their coaches on Facebook. A University of Colorado offensive tackle was suspended from a bowl game in December for sending a racially threatening message through Facebook to a Colorado cross-country runner.
- An employer who was ready to hire a student from Vermont Technical College in Randolph Center changed his mind after seeing the student's Facebook page, says Lauri Sybel, director of the college career center. Since then, Sybel says she has checked other students' pages to make sure they weren't hurting their job prospects.

'Facebook is for the students'

In the past two years, young people have jumped onto the free, ad-supported social sites, especially MySpace (generally popular with high school students) and Facebook (which the company says is used by 65% of undergrads at four-year colleges and is now open to high-schoolers as well).

Traffic on Facebook has grown 272% in the past year, making it the 66th most popular website in February, according to ComScore Media Metrix, which tracks Internet use.

Traffic on MySpace has grown 318% in the last year to 37.3 million visitors in February, making it the top social networking site on the Web and the eighth most popular website overall, according to ComScore Media Metrix. In July, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought MySpace for \$580 million.

With recent news coverage of the sites and their explosive growth, authorities have taken notice, concerned not only about inappropriate behavior but that, kids are making themselves vulnerable to predators.

Police recently have investigated several cases involving teens who were sexually assaulted by men they met on these sites. Earlier this week, two men were indicted on federal charges that they used the Internet to have sexual contact with girls from Connecticut.

"Our students as well as many other students across the country are setting themselves up to become victims," says Pat Johnson, principal of Canby (Ore.) High School, where two students were suspended for going around the school's technical blocks and being on MySpace at school.

"There was a picture of three women who appeared to be naked from the top up, in the shower together," she says. She also found pictures of students who appeared to be snorting lines of cocaine and smoking marijuana. "You can only think: What if one of the big accounting firms comes across this, or a law firm or law school or graduate school?"

According to the Herald-Tribune in Sarasota Florida, a North Port High School teacher sued a student last week, alleging he posted her picture on the popular Website, MySpace, along with some explicit comments. A new battle is brewing in Sarasota. Does a school have the right to punish students for things they write on the Internet? The school says yes, because it disrupts the learning environment on campus. Some courts in other parts of the country say the students have the "Constitutional right to free speech."

There are **other dangers** as well on web sites like MySpace and LiveJournal. The teens can find information from other teens how such topics as anorexia.

Interests

Relevant Communities

The following communities are also interested in "**anorexia**".

375 matches:

The pro-anorexia movement, also known as pro-ana, is described as an "eating disorder" by physicians, but on many Internet sites is labeled a lifestyle choice and is often personified as "Ana."

For example, a 16-year-old from Arizona, identifying herself as "Starved 2 Perfection," wrote on MySpace.com "I decided to become anorexic. I have only been at it for a short time but already I am in love. Ana helps me feel in control. She helps me do at least one thing right in my life."

Another pro-ana site, "Ana's Underground Grotto" offers readers 40 reasons not to eat and essays promoting anorexia as a choice. They also post pictures to inspire other teens. They have pictures of movie stars who are anorexia and deed them as heroes and one to emulate. They have sayings such as "Thin is In" and "Bones are beautiful"

Interests

Relevant Communities

The following communities are also interested in "**suicide**".

384 matches:

Bleed away your problems

MySpace.com logged 37.5 million visits in February alone, according to a recent *USA Today* report. The site is hailed by the music industry and trade press for its ability in recent years to launch several recording artists' careers. In addition, the site is loaded with various spaces to visit, hear new music not being played on radio and read up on bands.

Perhaps the above people are alarmist. Does MySpace involve that many students? Let's look at the numbers:

ABOUT THE SITES

MYSFACE.COM

Founded: January 2004

Users: 32.2 million

Cost: Free

Min. age requirement: 14

XANGA.COM

Founded: October 1998

Users: 6.5 million

Cost: Free (pay services available)

Min. age requirement: 13

FACEBOOK.COM

Founded: February 2004

Users: 4.7 million

Cost: Free

Min. age requirement: 13

Users source: Nielsen/Net ratings

What can we as parents do to protect our children?

Make sure that your children's computers are not in their bedrooms.

Place the computers in a family room where you can go and check to see what they are doing.

Reinforce to your children that they are NEVER to give out their name, age, address, phone number or school to ANYONE on the Internet.

Make sure that your children do not post any pictures of themselves or their friends on the Internet. Pictures have often been changed in a way you or your children would not like.

Check the computer files so you can tell where your children have been on the Internet.

Encourage your children to tell you of their online conversations and experiences.

As with all things in a child's life TALKING is the best medicine.

I have heard many times that the children know more about the computer than the parent does, so quite often the children have more access than they need. If you bought a new power saw or power drill, you would not give it to your children to use without close supervision. If they were to use the drill or saw incorrectly, they could cut themselves so severely they could bleed to death or hurt or lame a friend or sibling. The dangers on the Internet are much worse, they may not lose a limb but they could easily lose their life by giving the wrong information to the wrong people.

If you have any question, want more information, or would like to discuss the above information with me just come by the school or call the school to set up a time and I will be happy to discuss this or any information with you. I have the complete article from USA Today and the Herald-Tribune in Sarasota Florida

Thank you and Safe surfing on the Internet.

Donna Graham, Thomas Hart Academy