

Protect Kids On MySpace

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(CBS) *Larry Magid analyzes technical issues for CBS News and CBSNews.com.*

Predators looking for teenage girls or boys have a tool that makes it very easy for them to find and groom their victims and millions of teens are playing right into their hands.

I wouldn't be writing this column if I thought I were spilling secrets or, in any way, aiding adults who have an inappropriate interest in teens but, unfortunately, predators tend to be very good at what they do and most of them probably already know about what I'm about to tell you.

The sad fact is that it is very easy to find teenage victims in your community, thanks to an online social networking service called MySpace.com. This advertising-supported site, which was acquired last year by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, presents a veritable smorgasbord of teenagers, organized by community and high school.

If you know the name of your local school and the sex and age of teens you're seeking, you can find them on MySpace. What's more, in most cases, you can find pictures, names and photos of their friends, details about where they were born, what they like, and where they hang out. In many cases, you can also find their full names and cell phone numbers.

 **CBS News technology consultant Larry Magid talks with John Shehan, manager of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline about [the dangers kids face](#).**

As an experiment, I used the site's search function to look for 16- and 17-year-old "women" who attend the high school near where I live — where my kids went to school. Within seconds, I was presented with a list of 198 girls who were registered on the service. Including boys, there were 577 listings for "current students," which represents about a third of the school's student body.

The search function allows you to specify age, starting at 16. MySpace's terms of service say that it's open to people 14 or older, but there is no age verification process to prevent younger kids from setting up an account by lying about their date of birth.

One of the girls, who is 16, has a sexually suggestive word as part of her user name. Thanks to MySpace, I have a pretty complete picture of her life. I know the day she was born, the hospital she was born in, her full name, where she goes to school, what she likes to eat, what time she goes to bed at night and her favorite fast-food restaurant. She gets along with her parents "sometimes." In the past month she says she has consumed alcohol, eaten sushi, been to a mall, and gone "skinny dipping." She says she has shoplifted at least once, wants to be a lawyer and would like to visit Egypt. Information such as this, which used to take predators months to extract from a child, can be skillfully used to help win a child's confidence.

Thanks to several pictures on her site, I also know exactly what she looks like and have seen pictures of many of her friends and am able to access her friends' profiles as well. This girl lives within a few miles of my house. Some of the pictures were clearly taken at the local high school.

With this information it would be pretty easy for someone with bad intentions to find this girl. Then the question is, "What might happen?" Hopefully, the young lady would have the sense to avoid the person but, armed with enough information, predators can be very good at persuading would-be victims to comply with their wishes.

This is not to say that kids should necessarily avoid using MySpace or other social networking sites. These sites have some very positive attributes, including developing communications skills and, in some cases enhancing self-esteem. But they should follow some common sense guidelines to avoid becoming a victim.

Blogging Safety Tips

From BlogSafety.com (a site operated by CBS technology consultant Larry Magid)

- Avoid postings that could enable a stranger to find you. That includes your last name, the name of your school or sports teams, the town you live in and where you hang out.
- Check to see if your blogging service has a "friends" list that allows you to control who can visit your blog. If so, be sure to allow only people you know and trust. Be very careful before adding strangers to your list and be extremely careful about the information you post that can be accessed by people outside your friends list.

- Avoid getting together with someone you "meet" through a blog unless you are certain of their actual identity. If you do meet them, arrange the meeting in a public place and bring some friends along.
- Be very careful about photographs you put on your blog. It's best to avoid photos that can make it easy for people to recognize you. It's a very bad idea to post photos that are suggestive or sexual in nature. Before uploading a photo, ask how you would feel if that picture were seen by your parents, a college admissions counselor, a potential employer, a future boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse or, perhaps, your grandparents. What if you were to run for office someday? What you post on the Internet can be downloaded by others and can hang around forever.
- Avoid postings that could embarrass you, your friends or family members now or later. Remember, what you post on your blog can be copied and stored and could come back to haunt you years later.
- If you allow non-friends or strangers to post comments to your blog, check the comments regularly to make sure they're appropriate and, if not, remove them. Never allow messages that are mean, threatening or embarrassing to you or others. Never respond to such messages either. Just delete them and, if possible, block that person from visiting your blog.
- Do not lie about your age when you sign up for a blog. Age limitations are there for a good reason. Claiming that you are older than you are could get you into trouble and put you at risk.

For more information about blogging and Internet safety, please visit my sites, BlogSafety.com, SafeTeens.com and

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