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Teen Web hangouts can be gold mines for predators

Kids give out important info on sites like MySpace

BY MARA H. GOTTFRIED
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Heidi Welch's biggest worry about the family computer used to be that her kids might spend all night online. Welch and her husband dealt with their concern by creating a secret password that limited their children's access to the Web.

They didn't fret about Internet predators. That changed this month when their 15-year-old daughter disappeared. They quickly learned from their daughter's friends and the computer that she might have ventured out to meet a man she had met on a Web site popular with teens.

"The scenario with guys never entered my mind," said Welch, of St. Paul. "I'm not dumb, I'm not naive. You just never think it's going to happen to your kid."

With teenagers increasingly turning to sites such as MySpace.com to make friends and keep in touch with pals, some adults are using the sites to solicit children for sex. The sites, which abound with teens' pictures and personal information, can be a gold mine for sexual predators, law enforcement experts say.

Welch's daughter, Abbi, returned home safely about 24 hours after she disappeared. Before leaving, the girl confided to friends that the man was coming from Kentucky to pick her up. She later told police the man didn't show up. St. Paul police are investigating the matter.

There have been similar cases recently in the Twin Cities and across the country. A Georgia man has been charged with flying to Minnesota to have sex with a 15-year-old Eagan girl whom he corresponded with on Yahoo.com. In Connecticut, police are investigating seven sexual assault allegations involving MySpace, and New Jersey police are looking to see whether there is a connection between the slaying of a 14-year-old girl and a man she told friends she met on MySpace.

"It's becoming more of an area for predators to identify their potential victims, and I think it only is more so because there's more young people on these Web sites," said Cmdr. Neil Nelson, who heads the Minnesota Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, based at the St. Paul Police Department. "If kids are at the malls, the predators are going to go to the malls."

While young people might be aware of "stranger danger" in situations like malls, telephone chat lines and Internet chat rooms, the risks haven't sunk in for many spending time on the personal pages they establish on social networking Web sites, Nelson said.

Part of the problem is that in today's "Jerry Springer" era, in which it seems most everyone is comfortable sharing anything, teenagers often give out too much personal information on their Web sites, Nelson said. The big no-nos, which Nelson and others say are posted all too often, include full names, phone numbers, schools and workplaces. Sexually suggestive photographs also have become the norm.

Schools are becoming savvy to the Web sites. Bob Schmidt, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Secondary Principals, said principals across the state are reminding parents that they should be aware of these sites.

Some students, especially those in high school, get uptight about the reminders, Schmidt said.

"They think they're at the maturity level that their parents don't need to be looking over their shoulders when they're on the Internet," he said.

But adults need to be involved, said Connie Fiel, St. Paul Public Schools director of educational technology.

The district has blocked students from being able to access MySpace.com on computers at school since the fall. As new social networking Web sites become popular, teachers alert the district. And blocking such Web sites has become an everyday activity, Fiel said.

The Internet can be dangerous because people can pretend to be anyone they want to be, Nelson said.

"A person may claim to be a young person from another part of the country, but could be a 40-year-old child molester living down the block," he said.

There were 2,669 reports of online enticement of children for sexual acts to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline in 2005. All told, one in five children age 10 to 17 have received unwanted sexual solicitations online, according to a U.S. Department of Justice study.

At Stillwater Area High School, a convicted sex offender duped people when he visited the school three times and posed as a British duke who wanted to enroll. Joshua Gardner, 22, met a Stillwater student over MySpace and stayed with the teenager's family for two months.

Gardner stands accused of violating the terms of his probation.

Marisa Riley, a senior and managing editor of the school newspaper, which unmasked Gardner, said the situation prompted her and other students to revise their MySpace profiles. She took off personal information like her last name and birthday — anything someone could use to look deeper into her background.

"These sites are a great way to connect to friends. But you always need to have in the back of your mind who might be out there," Riley said.

MySpace officials didn't respond to a request for comment, but Rupert Murdoch, chairman of News Corp., which acquired the Web site last year, recently told Newsweek magazine the company dedicates a third of its work force to monitoring the site.

The mother of the Eagan teen who had sex with a Georgia man she had met via the Internet warned parents to tell authorities if they are worried about their children's Web relationships.

"The whole thing has been extremely devastating," she said. "I can't undo what's been done, but had I known there were resources, I would have stopped it. I wish other parents would know this — it's hard to patrol your child, but you don't have to take it all on yourself."

Megan Boldt contributed to this report.

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TIPS FOR TEENS

- Never give out identifying information such as your name, address, school or telephone number in online public forums like chat rooms or bulletin boards. Never send anyone a picture of yourself without first checking with your parent or guardian. Remember that being online does not make you completely anonymous.
- Immediately tell your parent, guardian or teacher if you are sent or see any information that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Contact the Web site if you are concerned about one of its users.
- Do not reply to "spam" messages.
- Never arrange to meet in person with anyone you've met online without telling your parent or guardian.
- MySpace users can make their sites private and accessible only to friends by going to "Account Settings" and then "Privacy Settings."

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- The "stranger danger" message is not effective, as danger to children — including teens — is much greater from someone you know or they know.
- Teach your children it is more important to get out of a threatening situation than it is to be polite.
- Practice what you talk about. Find opportunities to practice "what if" scenarios.
- At the same time you are giving older children more freedom, make sure they understand important safety rules as well. Speak openly about safety issues so children will be more forthcoming with you.

TO LEARN MORE

- Minnesota Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force: www.stpaul.gov/depts/police/icac/icac.html
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline: www.cybertipline.com
- NetSmartz Workshop: www.netsmartz.org