



Cyber-Shadows

Protecting Teens From the Dark Side of the Online World

by Stephen G. Wallace, M.S. Ed.

June 20, 2006

Parents everywhere no doubt cringed at word that a 16-year-old Michigan girl recently flew to the Middle East to meet a 25-year-old man she met on the social networking site Myspace.com. While made more salacious by time (she was gone five days) and distance (Jordan), the story mirrored many others highlighting the dangers lurking in the shadows of the online world.

Free to all comers, forums such as Myspace, Facebook, Xanga, and Friendster provide easy access to anyone searching for e-mail addresses, cell phone numbers, or details about body type, sexual preferences, or alcoholic beverages of choice. And the information flow doesn't stop there. A recent *Dateline NBC* investigation of teen pages found scenes of binge drinking, apparent drug use, and sex acts.

Law enforcement officials are so concerned that at least two states, Connecticut and Massachusetts, are investigating the link between these sites and incidents of sexual assault. But they're not going it alone. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) says that it has opened dozens of cases nationwide regarding activity on the sites and has received more than 500 complaints, including the following.

- Earlier this year, a 33-year-old Alabama man met a 14-year-old girl from New Jersey over one site and later abused her in Florida.
- In October 2005, a 13-year-old girl from Georgia, whose online profile said she was 29, was abused by a 30-year-old South Carolina man.
- Last September, an 11-year-old girl was fondled in her Connecticut home – while her parents slept – by a man she'd met through an online network and let into her home.

But child predators aren't the only problem and adults not the only perpetrators. Young people themselves often use the Internet to taunt, criticize, harass, intimidate, and gang up on each other. Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying leaves many kids feeling unsafe, humiliated, angry ... and perhaps looking for revenge. Essex County, Massachusetts, District Attorney Jonathan W. Blodgett told the *Boston Globe*, "We've seen an increase in assault crimes involving young people as a result of the computer. They go on and 'instant-message,' threatening each other, and it becomes assault the next day."

Still other teens surf porn sites online. According to a *Teens Today* study from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), more than one in four middle and high school students (27 percent) say they have used the Internet to view sexually explicit content.

So, what can parents do to keep their child safe? Wiredsafety.org offers some tips.

1. Keep the computer in a family room, kitchen, or living room, not in your child's bedroom.
2. Watch your children when they're online and see where they go.
3. Make sure that your children feel comfortable coming to you with questions.
4. Keep kids out of chatrooms unless they are monitored.
5. Get to know their "online friends" just as you get to know all of their other friends.

But parents can't go it alone. Just like in the real world, young people have a responsibility to protect themselves in the online world. i-SAFE America outlines for youth "The 4 Rs" of Internet safety.

1. **Recognize** techniques used by online predators to deceive.
2. **Refuse** requests for personal information.
3. **Respond** assertively if you are ever in an uncomfortable position online. Exit the program, turn off the computer, tell a trusted friend, or call the police.
4. **Report** any suspicious or dangerous contact that makes you feel uncomfortable.

i-SAFE also advises teens to take these precautions.

- Protect your identifying information (name, sex, age, address, school, teams). It takes only a little information for a predator to identify you.
- Create a username and online profile that is generic and anonymous.
- Know how to exit an inappropriate Web site.
- Guard your pictures. You never know who may be looking at them.
- Keep in mind that chatroom "friends" are not always whom they say they are.

For sure, the advent of the Internet – and more recently of social networking sites – brought with it new opportunities for the meaningful exchange of ideas and dialogue, better connecting young people to the wider world beyond their front door. Bringing light to its shadows will make that world more predictable and less risky.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, call toll-free 877-SADD-INC. or visit www.sadd.org.

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