Parents, Get a Clue: What Teens are Really Doing Online *Plus: Tips on How to Talk to Your Teen about Internet Safety*

by Elisabeth Wilkins, Empowering Parents Editor

Amber* got onto Myspace when she was 12. "It was easy," she said with a shrug. "All you have to do is lie about your age and give them your email address." The teen, who is now 15, said, "I guess I accepted a lot of 'Friends' to my list without really knowing who they were." On Myspace, Facebook, Xanga and other social networking sites, the goal is to acquire as many "friends" as possible, a virtual popularity contest that can add up to a whole lot of unknowns. That's how "Mike," a man posing as a teen-ager, started messaging Amber. Eventually, he suggested they meet, but before that rendezvous could happen, it emerged that Mike was really a 28-year-old delivery man from a nearby town. Amber had the sense to stop messaging him and remove him from her Friend List, but many other teens and pre-teens haven't been so fortunate. In Texas, a lawsuit was brought against Myspace by the parents of a fourteen-year-old who was sexually assaulted by a man she met on the social networking site. The suit was dismissed in court, but the problem of how to protect teens online remains.

Dr. Cynthia Kaplan has been the program director of Adolescent Residential Services at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts for more than 15 years. She is also the co-author of the new book,*Helping Your Troubled Teen: Learn to Recognize, Understand, and Address the Destructive Behaviors of Today's Teens*. "Ten years ago, I used to see kids with profound psychiatric problems," says Dr. Kaplan. "Now, on any given Monday, I see teenagers who've met someone over the Internet and run away. I get people coming into my office whose thirteen-year-old has been posing as an eighteen-year-old online, and invited someone back to her house. The parents wake up in the middle of the night to find a twenty-three-year old man walking into their daughter's bedroom."

"Teens don't often think about the 'cons' of what they post, so you see them making mistakes publicly and permanently. I don't think that teens realize the permanence of what they publish—it's pretty impossible to take back." —Anastasia Goodstein, author of *Totally Wired*

The Stranger in the Room

EmpoweringParents.com asked Lucy and Josh, two teens who are on both Myspace and Facebook, how they would know if they were talking to an older person who was posing as a teen-ager. "You just know," said Lucy. "It's easy to tell." "Yeah," said Josh. "You just steer away from people who you don't know, who aren't on your list of friends. And you block them if they get in." *The Norton Global Online Living Report,* released earlier this year, reported some alarming results: 16 percent of kids and teens have been approached by strangers online, and 42 percent have been asked to share personal information over the Internet.

Are Lucy and Josh over-confident, or do they know what they're talking about? Anastasia Goodstein, the author of

"*Totally Wired: What Your Teen is Really Doing Online*" agreed with what they had to say—for the most part. "I think the whole stranger issue—it's certainly out there, with predators as well as phishers or scammers." Because teens don't yet have a credit history, they are desirable targets for phishers and scammers, who break into their profiles and steal their identities, taking out credit cards and wracking up thousands of dollars worth of debt. Goodstein went on to say that identity thieves can "scrape" profiles with just a real first and last name and part of an address. On Myspace, spammers can hack in to your profile and send bulletins out as your child.

Most parents' greatest fear when it comes to their kid's online activities is still the issue of online predators. And the fear is real: "If girls put pictures of themselves up, predators are definitely zooming in on them. Teen-agers need to be smart," says Goodstein. "The good news is that most teens *are* smart. They don't want to talk to adults; they don't want to talk to some creepy 50-year-old guy. Actually, what law enforcement found is that only about five percent of kids engage in that type of contact [after being approached initially]." The teens and pre-teens to watch closely include kids who are not yet 14 and who are lying to be on Myspace—kids who often tend to be more naïve about people they meet online. Teens who are acting out in other ways—engaging in risky behavior, which may include using drugs and alcohol—should also be watched more carefully.

"These are the teens that are more likely to be vulnerable to advances—or who might even initiate a meeting with an online stranger," says Goodstein. Most of those meetings happen after there have been a series of contacts and communications made. "It goes back to which kids are going to do this—it's the same girl that's going to lie about getting into a college frat party and push those limits."

What Happens on the Internet, Stays on the Internet…and That's Part of the Problem
Although the Internet may feel safe, anonymous and impermanent, actually the opposite is true. What teens don't often realize is that what gets posted on the Internet, stays on the Internet. The online world for a teen is "Very much about confessing, talking about personal things to an invisible audience," says Goodstein. "Who knows who it is, but everyone is in that confessional booth with their video camera. When people talk about the generation gap, they often talk about this sense of privacy. The younger generation, because they've grown up this way, is much more comfortable putting it out there. They're creating their own sort of reality show about themselves on their sites."

Recently, a high school in Pennsylvania experienced this firsthand when two teens took photos of themselves during a sexual act and sent the pictures via cell phone to their friends. The image went viral, and now there's a whole page on Facebook, a "shrine" devoted to them. Since college recruiters and employers are routinely searching for profiles now before they say "yes" to applicants, a lapse in judgment can haunt teens for a long time to come. "Teens don't often think about the cons of what they post, so you see them making mistakes publicly and permanently," says Goodstein. "I don't think that teens realize the permanence of what they publish—it's pretty impossible to take back."

While social networking sites are not inherently bad—after all, they provide a place for teens to meet, keep in touch, and hang out, a sort of virtual mall or pizza joint—parents need to be aware of how they work. If not, says Dr. Kaplan, "The end result is that as a parent, I don't know what my kid

knows. We are already so far behind them it's frightening. Most of us don't know what Myspace is, so how can we control what our kids are doing on it? The best message is to talk to them proactively, before they join these sites."

Tips for Parents:

- Begin conversations about Internet safety as soon as you allow your kids on the Internet. You can use block filtering and monitoring for kids age 6-9 to prevent them from going on to a porn site, for example. But once kids are 12, 13, or 14, they know how to get around "Net Nanny" type programs and turn them off, and how to change browser history, so you need to have those conversations—the sooner, the better.

- Keep the computer in a central space in your house. (When your kids are working on something interesting, be sure to comment on that too.) "You need to understand the technology your child is using, and you need to set up ground rules," says Dr. Kaplan. Night time is often where the planning of dangerous liaisons happens, when teens are online. "We probably see a kid a month here at McLean who has run away with someone they met online. The important thing is that none of this stuff— computers, cells, iphones—should be in their bedroom." If you have a child who engages in risky behavior, insist on getting their passwords and "spot checking" their profiles. As a parent, you need to factor in your child's personality and then decide how closely you will monitor their online activities.

- One way to have a conversation about social networking sites: You can ask your teen to help you set up *your* profile. "They'll roll their eyes and act like they can't believe how dumb you are, but they'll be secretly pleased that you know they're good at it," says Goodstein. Click on privacy settings together and make sure your kids know how to set their default settings from public to private. "If you go on Myspace and find that you or your teen have set your profile to 'public,' that's a great teachable moment. Then you can have the conversation: that the college recruiter can find it, future employers can look at it, anyone can see your profile." Be sure to talk about what's appropriate to post, and what's not.

- People should never, under any circumstances, post personal information like social security numbers, telephone numbers or their address on a profile. This makes them easy targets for phishers, scammers and identity thieves.

- Don't ever share passwords with anyone: not best friends, boyfriends or girlfriends. There have been cases where the relationship has gone sour and people have gotten revenge through a Myspace or Facebook profile, by posing as the person with whom they have a grudge.

- Let your kids know that the computer keeps a record of online exchanges and where they originate from on the hard drive—even though it looks as if the message "disappears." Tell your child that they should use the same language online that they would in face-to-face communication. They should never say anything rash or threatening because the emails and instant messages can be downloaded and the child can get into real trouble.

- Teens need to know that they can't assume everyone online is who they say they are. They should always report any inappropriate material or conversations immediately to their parents and to the social networking site.

Understand that while most of the activity that takes place on Facebook and Myspace is harmless, many teens are using social networking sites as a place to fill a void, feel popular, and hook up with other users. If you find your child's profile online, you need to talk with them *immediately* about the possible consequences of posting their personal information and photos. Says Dr. Kaplan, "The whole idea here is to let the child know that the Internet is 'public domain' and that they do not have the privacy or anonymity they think they do."

Names of teens in this article have been changed.