Social Networking Site Safety
By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

The earliest concept of what is now referred to as an Internet social networking site got its start in 1988 when America Online® created friends profiles that were easily searchable by interest topics. Between 2002 and 2004 several other social networking sites began appearing and according to USA Today, the most popular one now boasts more than 70 million members.

Social networking sites—which may loosely be explained as a cyber combination of a school yearbook, personal diary, social club, or gathering place—are extremely popular with kids, teens, and even adults. The sites are free, easy to join, and messaging between members is nearly effortless. Each user develops a home page or profile page that has a self-composed, descriptive profile. Some of these pages contain personal photos and most contain message boards. In some situations, instead of using email or instant messaging, some kids will keep in touch with friends by simply posting bulletins for one another. The home page or profile page can be used by friends to send private messages or just to post a public comment. Friends can also view a teen's photo album or they can read a web journal that is called a blog.

Unfortunately, child molesters will exploit social networking sites because they often provide another means by which to gain access to young people. Law enforcement has frequently found that the personal information that kids post on their pages can make them vulnerable to predators. Even teens who don't list their names and addresses can provide enough personal information—such as the names of their schools or the names of their friends—for a molester to use in order to con their way into their lives.

On July 24, 2007, MSNBC reported that one such networking site admitted that it had identified more than 29,000 registered sex offenders in the United States who had created accounts and were actually using their real names on their profile page. In one reported case, a registered sex offender had even posted his police mug shot on his social networking profile page because he had no one to take his photograph. The identification of the registered sex offenders by the site followed extensive formal legal requests by several state attorneys general who demanded that the website provide data on how many registered sex offenders were using the service, along with information about where they live.

Unfortunately, the 29,000 registered sex offenders who were reported to the state attorneys general are probably only a small fraction of the number of predators using social networking sites because there are likely many more offenders who were deceptive enough to use aliases rather than real names. Additionally, the information that was provided to the state attorneys general in this case is from a single social networking site only—and there are several other popular sites that exist in on the Internet today.

So What is a Caring Adult To Do?

Establish family Internet rules—As soon as your children begin to use the Internet on their own, it is a good idea to come up with a list of rules that everyone in the family can all agree upon.

These rules should also include whether your children can use or visit social networking sites and the rules for using them. Establish immediately that you will monitor the site and its contents.

Proactive parenting techniques regarding social networking sites are needed today not only to protect your child or teen against child molesters but other social networking dangers such as the hoax that was recently reported in Missouri where a depressed 13 year old girl hanged herself after an ex-friend's mother pretended to be an online boyfriend who was initially caring and then turned very mean.

Educate yourself about the social networking site—Once you have identified the social networking site that is most popular in your area, school, or parish you must evaluate the site that your child plans to use and carefully read the privacy policy, code of conduct and the rules. You should also find out if the site monitors the content that people post on their pages. The recommended age for signing up for most social networking sites is usually 13 and over, although many underage children still can find a way to join by simply claiming that they are older. If children are under the recommended age for these sites, do not let them use the sites. Most importantly, if you have allowed a child or teen to join and create a profile, you should periodically review the child's page and their friends' pages for content.

Restrict the posting of personal information—As a child or teen creates the profile page, verify that he or she does not use a full name. Only allow the use of a non-identifying nickname. Also, do not allow children to post the full names of their friends on their profile page. In addition to prohibiting posting identifiable information in a child's profile such as home address, cell phone number, and date of birth. It is important to be aware that some social networking sites allow members to join public groups that are intended to include everyone who goes to a certain school, or claims that they attend the school. Be careful when your children reveal this and other information that could be used to identify them, such as the name of the town they live in, especially if it is a small one.

Be cautious about details in photographs—Explain to young people that photographs can reveal a lot of personal or private information. Encourage them not to post photographs of themselves or their friends with clearly identifiable details such as street signs, license plates on cars, the home address numbers, or the name of their school on their sweatshirts.

Warn your children about expressing emotions to strangers—As a caring adult, you've probably already discouraged young people from communicating with strangers online. However, young people also use social networking sites to write journals and poems that often express strong emotions. Explain to children that these words can be read by anyone with access to the Internet, even if they have been marked private, and that predators often search out emotionally vulnerable young people.

Insist that your children never physically meet anyone in person that they've communicated with only online—Children should be encouraged to electronically communicate only with friends or people they've actually previously met in person. Young people are in real danger if they actually meet "Internet friends" who are in fact strangers that they've only communicated with online.

Social networking sites are gaining in popularity every day. In some schools, social recognition or being known as one of the "popular kids" is now based upon how many "friends" you have listed on your profile or home page. It is therefore essential that caring adults not only understand how these sites work, but also how to remain actively involved in monitoring how young people are using the sites.

Cyber-Bullying: Protecting Young People from Technology Dangers
By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

Introduction

With the pervasiveness of ever changing electronic technology, the home is no longer the refuge from all bullies as it once was. Today, a bully using an electronic device can anonymously bully and invade the safe and secure territory that the home historically provided to avoid teasing and harassment.

The Online Urban Dictionary defines a bully as a young hoodlum who revels in making peoples lives miserable during school years. Cyber-bullying is defined as when the Internet, cell phones, or other electronic devices are used to send or post text messages or visual images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.

Cyber-bullying can take many forms, such as:

- Cruel instant computer messaging
- Threatening emails
- Mean, repeated cell phone text messages
- Creating a web site for the purpose of mocking certain students
- Posting humiliating "photo shopped" or digitally modified images of students on a social networking site
- Forwarding "private" photos or videos to other students
- Pretending to be someone else by using someone's online screen name
- Flaming, which is posting offensive messages or so called "flames," within online discussion forums, the IRC, or newsgroups

The victims of cyber-bullying often suffer anxiety, loneliness, depression, and a lack of self-esteem. Some teens have even committed suicide as the result of cyber-bullying. Contrary to popular belief, the school age victims of cyber-bullying are not always the unpopular loners, but just regular kids. The biggest problem today is the ever-constant connection between victims and cyber-bullies by virtue of cell phones and computers.

Why do they do it?

Just as the Internet spawned a new type of anonymous online predator, cyber-bullies are probably braver when utilizing electronic technology to carry out their hostile and intimidating behavior because it takes less nerve to express insensitive comments—often anonymously—using with a cell phone or computer keyboard.

Some offenders are motivated by anger, revenge, or frustration. Sometimes they do it for entertainment or simply because they are bored. Many do it for laughs or to get a reaction from the victim. Sometimes bullies torment others to remind certain students of their social standing in school.

Some even do it initially by accident when they send an electronic message to the wrong recipient. Because motives differ and cyber-bullying can be done 24/7, the response and the solutions to each type of cyber-bullying incident must differ, too.

What is a school's role in this?

Schools can be very effective in working with parents to stop cyber-bullying situations. An essential starting point is to educate the students regarding the implications of the electronic harassment of other students. Another proactive measure is to require that student cell phones be left in school lockers. Not only does this protect a victim from photos or videos being filmed or photographed surreptitiously in a bathroom or shower, it limits the activity of the "always connected" offenders.

The best school cyber-bullying intervention model is threefold:

- School-wide Interventions—A survey of cyber-bullying problems at the school, increased supervision, school-wide assemblies, and teacher in-service training to raise the awareness of children and school staff regarding cyber-bullying.

- Classroom-level Interventions—The establishment of classroom rules against cyber-bullying, regular class meetings to discuss bullying at school, and meetings with all parents.

- Individual-level Interventions—Discussions with students identified as cyber-bullies and the victims of cyber-bullying**.**

When the school intervenes with a cyber-bully and his or her parents, the initial discussion should include:

- Explaining what cyber-bullying is and why it is not acceptable.
- Talking with the student about the impact of bullying others. Trying to get them to understand what it is like for the person being bullied.
- Clearly explaining the school rules on cyber-bullying and the consequences for breaking them.
- Discussing what the student thinks might help them to stop bullying in the future.
- Increasing the Internet or electronic communication supervision of the student—NO school Internet access and NO cell phone on school property.

Some schools get involved in disciplining a student for cyber-bullying incidents that take place off school property and outside of school hours, the schools have been accused of exceeding their authority or violating a student's right to free speech. While it is important to consult with legal experts on these possible claims, it is prudent for the school to include a provision to the school's "student policy" reserving the right to discipline a student for any type of cyber-bullying situations on or off school property.

In order to develop a case against a cyber-bully, the school disciplinarian must retain all evidence of the cyber-bullying. The school file should include computer screen captures, message logs, photos or any other evidence that will demonstrate the seriousness of the behavior and its impact on the victim and the school. This file is especially important if the school intends to formally punish a student with suspension or expulsion.

The school may also enlist the support of local law enforcement by notifying a School Resource Officer (SRO) or the Juvenile Officer. This is especially important when it involves a threat to the safety of a student or a staff member.

What can you do?

A caring adult should always refrain from the knee jerk reaction of immediately banning a victim's access to instant messaging, e-mail, social networking sites, a cell phone, or the Internet. This strategy neither addresses the underlying conflict, nor does it eliminate current or future instances of cyber-bullying victimization. It also punishes the victim and not the offender. It may also close the open lines of communication that a parent has with their child.

A potential victim of electronic technology abuse cannot be vulnerable to emails that are never opened. Talk with your children and encourage them to be cautious opening any emails unless they are familiar with the sender. If your child receives an email or text message that is hurtful or from a cyber-bully, tell them to NEVER respond to it. Responding to a cyber-bully frequently only causes the bullying to escalate. Instead, the victim should save the email, text, or message and then tell a parent or a trusted adult what happened. Internet Service providers can often block cyber-bullies. If the school has educated their students regarding cyber-bullying, hopefully the victim of cyber-bullying will feel comfortable turning to his or her school authorities to quash the cyber-bullying. Finally, if a child has been threatened with harm, the police should be notified immediately.