



ONLINE COMMUNITIES PROVIDE FRIENDSHIPS AND DANGERS FOR TEENS

February 13, 2006

Teens are flocking to social networking Web sites like MySpace and Xanga. Nearly 50 million people have subscribed to MySpace.com since it began just two years ago and the site ranks seventh among English language sites.

For many teens, logging onto MySpace is the first and last thing they do every day. “It’s addictive,” said Ivoren Diaz, a junior at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va. “You can spend hours looking at pages.”

NewsHour Extra spoke with a group of eight juniors and seniors from Wakefield, and they said the Internet is now their main source of communication among friends.

“Parents can overhear you when you talk on the phone,” explained junior Johanna Maldonado. When asked if she was concerned that her parents might read what she wrote, Maldonado said, “They can only read it if they know how to go online and they don’t.”

Senior Cecilia Hussey added, “The only thing my mother is concerned about with MySpace is the time I put into it.”

Safety features go unused

MySpace.com says despite its site’s usefulness, “it does have its dark side.”

Safety features can prevent strangers from reading blogs, sending messages or viewing pages and there is a 14-year-old minimum age requirement for membership. But many teens eager to meet friends lie about their age when registering for the site and few use the privacy features.

Unfortunately, teens aren’t the only ones who lie about their age. MySpace.com tries to prevent members over age 19 from viewing teenagers Web profiles but has no way to verify people’s information.

MySpace.com acknowledges the problem and its safety tips caution members that “you never really know who you are chatting with online. That cute 21-year-old guy may not be cute, may not be 21 and may not be a guy!”

Despite the warnings, teens often post their full names and contact information like IM addresses and phone numbers.

Meeting strangers online

Law enforcement officials are urging teens to be careful.

“There are people who are out there shopping for someone to victimize,” detective Jay Barnes told the Albuquerque Journal. “You put yourself in danger when you put your information out there, no matter what site it is. It’s just like going into dark places at night.”

That is what happened to 13-year-old Alicia Kozakiewicz, who agreed to meet an online acquaintance, but was eventually found tied to the bed of a 38-year-old computer programmer hundreds of miles from home. FBI agents were able to find Alicia because her kidnapper bragged to an Internet acquaintance and sent photos.

According to the FBI’s Web site on Internet safety, one in five Internet users between ages 10 and 17 report being approached for sex online and 1 in 33 are asked by a stranger to meet for a real world encounter.

But Sean Keyser, a senior at Wakefield, said the dangers of the Internet are “nothing worse than you’re going to face in real life.” His classmates said kids who agree to meet people they’ve met online are “just stupid” and that their parents should teach them better.

However, Keyser has made friends while gaming online, and he and his mother are planning to fly to New York to meet one for the first time.

Internet benefits

Despite the dangers, MySpace.com continues to be an important part of teens’ social life because it connects all their friends in one convenient place.

“I like MySpace because I have a cousin in Georgia and we can talk about boys and stuff,” said Hussey.

“I use [MySpace] to keep in touch with friends over the summer,” said another student, Aileen Pangan.

Teens use MySpace to talk to friends who moved away or those who attend different schools.

The Wakefield students also said sites like MySpace have changed the social scene at their school.

“People you see, but don’t talk to you will approach you online,” said Maldonado.

Hussey agreed. “At lunch you sit with the same group of friends. But on MySpace you will talk to people you wouldn’t talk with at school.”

And creating MySpace pages can develop marketable skills. Maldonado said she learned HTML computer coding to design Web pages for sites like MySpace, and the experience helped her win an award at a recent technology fair.

“If I get my own business, I can create my own Web pages, I don’t need to hire anyone,” she said.

--By Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions