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An excerpt from Parry Aftab's Upcoming Book

Internet Safety 1-2-3

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MySpace, Facebook and Xanga, Oh! My!

Blogs, personal websites and social-networking profiles

What Your Children are Saying When You're Not Around

There are always trends in what kids are doing online. The latest trends are cyberbullying and posting their online diaries and most personal thoughts on social-networking websites. These sites include MySpace.com, Xanga.com and FaceBook.com, among others. They are a cross between an online diary, a cyberdating network and a place to share your creativity and express yourself – on steroids. ☺

Recently, I have been receiving a large number of inquiries from schools, parents, regulators and the media about social-networking websites. I decided that it was important to address parent concerns and answer their questions where they needed it most. So, we agreed to work with the most popular of all social-networking sites, MySpace.com and several others. We will also be sharing our safety tips at the other leading sites, as well.

MySpace.com and other similar sites are designed to allow people to share their creativity, pictures, and information with others. It also allows them to network with others online. Sometimes people do this to find romance. Sometimes they do it to find friends with similar interests. While this may be okay for adults, it is not okay for kids and may not be okay for young teens without parental supervision.

Most social-networking websites agree and prohibit anyone under a certain age from using their website. Unfortunately, while they may set rules to keep younger teens off the site, they can't prevent kids from lying about their age and pretending to be old enough to use the website. (These sites are typically free and without a payment authentication, they never know who their members are in real life.) To address the lying some sites have developed special software applications designed to help identify underage members by reviewing the contents of member profiles. It's not perfect, but it does help spot many underage members.

While we can't always tell if someone is lying about their age, MySpace.com really does try to keep them off their site. Many other similar sites do not. So, when allowing your child to use a social-networking website, even with your supervision, make sure it's a trustworthy one.

We have learned a great deal about why kids use these kinds of sites. Most use them for innocent

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purposes. They want to find their friends and communicate among larger groups than they can do via instant messaging. They can post something and know everyone in their class or group can read it at the same time. They want to show off their creativity and how special they are. And they can pretend to be prettier, more popular, richer and more famous than they are in real life.

Most aren't there for meeting strangers or checking out provocative photos. But in some rare cases, they are acting out, taking risks and seeking romance online. That's when things can get dangerous, of users of all ages, but especially young teens. (You can learn more about Internet sexual predators and how they operate at our new site for preventing and helping young victims of Internet sexual predators, Katie'splace.org.)

But there's more to it. When I polled more than 5000 kids every month on this, I learned that they love the creativity of it. They love expressing themselves so others can appreciate it. They enjoy adding sparkly graphics and sharing their stories, poems and jokes. One of the Teenangels (WiredSafety's expert teen and preteen program, teenangels.org) told me that it's all about "Pink! Pink! Pink!" She can build a page using pink font, on a black background and feel creative and cool.

As important as allowing them to express themselves in a creative way is, though, it's not enough to get me to do a turn-about with these kinds of sites and teens. I was very negative about these sites. I have now taken a second look after talking to another one of my Teenangels.

This Teenangel (a soft-spoken and gentle girl) did a research project on social networking websites. She reviewed some of these sites and listed the kinds of risks young teens face on these websites. She then went on to explain that she had several profiles online at these sites. I was initially shocked and disappointed that one of my expert teens would take such risks with their personal information when they knew better. When I asked her why she would do such a risky thing, as the Teenangels often do, this one taught me something new.

She explained that it's hard being a young teen these days. Few kids in the school will give you the chance to see how much you have to offer unless you are the captain of the cheerleading squad or of the debate team. A profile page that is open to the other students at your school gives you a chance to share the special things about yourself with them, and will help them get to know you better. It's about sharing your favorite movies and books, about sharing fun vacation memories and your dreams, it's about sharing how special you are. It's about helping you make friends in your school with people who appreciate you. It's not about strangers, it's about others in their class.

There is a real value to that. Whether it's by posting a profile page that is supervised by their parents, or building a website. It can be pink and sparkly, or thoughtful and inspiring. But it's all about who your teen is or who they want to be. It's a challenge to give them a place where they can express themselves while keeping them safe, protected from predators and from sharing too much private information online. But if you are willing to supervise what they are saying and doing on their profiles, I'm willing to help.

Lying on their pages is part of what this is all about, too. They pretend to be older (and not just to get around the age restrictions), richer, more famous or more popular. Boys pretend to be girls and girls pretend to be boys. They may be tall blonde surfers from Malibu or live on a ranch in New

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Zealand. While this may not be a problem, some of their other kinds of pretending can be dangerous for teens in a public social network.

They may act tougher than they are in real life “rl,” provoke other, or talk about getting drunk, or their sexuality. They may pose as someone they don't like, to cyberbully and harass them, or steal their identities. I have spent years protecting children from predatorial adults. I never thought I would be spending as much time as I am protecting them from each other.

But, they are using these sites by the millions. And their use will only grow. So, it's worth the effort to find out if your child is one of them. Start by asking them. Hopefully they will be honest with you. If they aren't or you suspect they may be lying, it doesn't hurt to check out the more popular ones yourself. Search for your child by e-mail address, name and school. While they often lie about their e-mail address (either creating a special free web-based one just for this, that you may not recognize, or by making one up) or their name, they NEVER lie about their school. That's the only way their friends can find them. If you discover that your child has one of these profiles (or several, which is very common) and is lying to you, you need to take action. This isn't about technology, it's about dishonesty and hiding something important from you. And it might be a good time to buy and install a monitoring product, to be able to find their other lies and their next social-networking website they are trying to keep you from seeing.

If they admit that they have a page and show it to you, review it carefully, without over-reacting. Keep an open mind. (And take 5! To keep from panicking!) Have they posed as someone older? Posted person images? Included their friends on their site or been included by their friends on their sites? And don't make a big fuss about their language. It's what kids do online. Caution them, but don't judge them by the language they use online. If they are posting using chatlingo shorthand, you can visit Teenangels.org and use our chatlingo translator to see what they are saying.

Then you have two choices. You can have the site taken down, or you can supervise what they are posting and doing. It's important that you help keep your child safe online, even if you may be shocked by what you find your child is saying behind your back. And be aware that these are important to them. They all do it, even if they shouldn't. So, it's possible that your young teen will rebel and just set up a page again, but hide it better this time. It may be better to work with them than prohibit the profiles altogether.

Next, don't panic. You should take advantage of this opportunity to review their page first. You might be surprised (hopefully pleasantly) by what they are saying. If not, we'll teach you what to do, too.

If they haven't posted anything to put them at risk, and aren't communicating with strangers, ask them why they want a social-networking profile page. You might be surprised at what they tell you. While parents freak out (understandably) at the provocative images and wild language used by many on these sites, most of the teens don't see them or pay attention to them. They are there to show off their creativity and self-expression and to communicate with their offline friends. As long as they are old enough to understand the rules and adhere to them (no one under 13 is old enough for this, even with parental approval in my humble opinion), and as long as you keep an eye on what they are doing, posting and how they are communicating with others, it's YOUR choice as to

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whether they keep their site up or not. (Make sure that you don't become the self-appointed profile police, reporting other people's kids for posting underage until you speak with their parents first!)

If you find that they are saying and posting inappropriate things or those comments don't seem to conform to their otherwise good offline behavior, don't panic yet. Think about how our parents would have reacted if they could have seen or heard everything we said to our friends when no adult was around. I guarantee that they would have been almost as shocked as many parents are about what their kids are posting online.

Also, remember that many of the things your kids are saying are being said to impress their audience and are often not true. (Luckily!)

The important difference between what we used to say or do and their posting online, however, is that when we acted out or boasted about acting out, we didn't do it to an audience of millions of people. So, while you shouldn't panic, you should take quick action if your kids are posting personal information in a public forum, or communicating with strangers online.

Also, know that this isn't new. Our kids have been saying and doing outrageous things online since the Web was born. We just don't know about it, but all the other kids do. It's how they communicate online. In 1999 we conducted the largest academic survey done to date for teenage girls. Almost 11,000 of the teens polled answered our questions about what they did online. When we asked them to explain if they had done anything online that they wouldn't have done in person, here's what they said (in their own words):

- ◆ "Yes, obviously people are more bold and outgoing on the Internet when they don't have to deal with the consequences of their actions."
- ◆ "Of course! All people do. A computer with a phone line is like a mask to the world. You can do or say anything and you won't ever have to meet this person. For instance, my little brother is 13 and he tells people he's 16 or older. He's a sweet guy and has a very high respect for females. Online, however, he says very cruel and suggestive things to and about them. He acts like a monster. It's disgraceful... and a little scary."
- ◆ "Yes, of course... our usual boundaries and personal walls are down and we can act more carefree and outspoken if we feel like. At least this is true for me... you can act like a goddess."
- ◆ "I have cursed out a lot of ppl [people], and when my bud comes over, we go into places like the African American room and yell "KKK ALL THE WAY" or go to the Jewish room and say "HEIL HITLER," but I haven't done that since I started going back to church and was saved by Jesus Christ. We were just joking, we weren't really racist."
- ◆ "Yes, but I'd rather not describe what I did. Instead, I'll just say that online, you can be absolutely ANYONE you want to be, which is why a lot of people do things that they would not normally do. In real life, people everywhere judge you based on your looks, actions, and who knows what else, but online, all that really matters is your attitude and personality."
- ◆ "Uh well, I tried cyber sex before and I wouldn't ever do that in real life. Sex period. I don't believe in premarital sex. I think that is a great gift you give your husband. I once told someone off because he/she was being perverted and talking nasty to me and I didn't like it."

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- ◆ "Well, once I told this guy I met in a chat room all about me and, like, my phone number and stuff. I now realize that this was really stupid of me and will never do anything like it again cause although it's not likely, he could be a psycho or something."
- ◆ "I feel I can speak more freely to someone online about my problems because most of them don't go to my school or even the same state. I can ask them advice and they would probably give me the best because they aren't in favor of a certain person. I can introduce myself and meet new people because it isn't as uncomfortable to look into their eyes and if you become really uncomfortable I can just get out of it by blocking them or getting offline."
- ◆ "I have had cyber sex... that's something I never have done and never will do until I'm married in real life."
- ◆ "I am much more bold online than in real life. I am VERY shy and I say things on the Internet that I normally wouldn't say in public."
- ◆ "I have lied for no reason. Actually, I told a guy I couldn't give him my number cause my mom doesn't want guys calling me cause it was during the school year. My mom doesn't really care who calls me I just didn't know what to say."
- ◆ "Yeah, I wouldn't flirt with people I just met in person, unlike on the Internet."
- ◆ "Flirt more easily, say things I wouldn't say in person, not bad things, just more honest things."
- ◆ "Yeah, because it's a lot easier to talk and get to 'know' someone online because you can't see their face. I never have done anything bad but I've been a lot more easy going and free for what I'd say online then in a live situation which in someways have helped me to be more comfortable talking to new guys in person."
- ◆ "Well, honestly... yes. I had cyber sex! I will never have real sex until I am married, after I engaged in cybering, I totally felt grossed out, like I know I was doing something wrong! I will not make that mistake again."

When we asked them if they ever pretend to be someone else in cyberspace, here's what they answered (in their own words):

- ◆ "Of course I've pretended. Everyone does. You pretend to be older... or you pretend to be a guy... or you just pretend to be whoever you wanna be."
- ◆ "Yes, I just changed myself to be someone I wasn't because I wanted to get a different reaction from people. It gave me a way to see myself as who I wanted to be but by doing it I realized that that is not who I want to be and that I just want to be me."
- ◆ "Yes. If I am ever in a chatroom I always make up things about myself. This is why I say don't trust anyone because everybody else does the same thing."
- ◆ "Since nobody seems to be eager to talk to a 15 year old, I always pretended I was 18 year old female. However, that sometimes attracted bad attention from guys."
- ◆ "Yes. I pretended to be anyone from Leonardo DiCaprio to a serial killer."
- ◆ "I once pretended to be a 16 year old girl. I wanted to talk to my boyfriend to see if he would agree to meet her in person. He did and I told him who I really was and we broke up."
- ◆ "Yes, I've pretended to be so many people. It's fun and safe and because nobody knows who you really are."
- ◆ "Well we've ALL pretended to be older or have a different name or something. Who doesn't? It's part of the fun about being online... you can be whoever you want to be for a little while."
- ◆ "Yes, I pretended to be someone that I wish I could be like a popular person."

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- ♦ "I haven't pretended to be someone else, but I have pretended to be a couple of years older than I am, because not many people my age are online to talk to, and if they are, they must be lying about their age, too."
- ♦ "No, I think it is wrong to lie to other people about who you are. I wouldn't want someone to do it to me so I don't do it to them."

When we asked them if they had ever been in a situation online that frightened them, here's what they said:

- ♦ "My friend agreed to meet a guy she met online when he came to our hometown, and she wanted some of us to come along to keep them company. I told my parents but luckily the guy's game got canceled. I wouldn't have gone and I would not support her decision to meet anyone in real life. She kinda felt betrayed but at least she's still alive."
- ♦ "Once I was scared because this guy kept telling me all this stuff about me, like my name, address, friends' names, etc. he said he knew where I lived and stuff, and I better watch out. It ended up being a joke from a friend of a friend, but I was still scared, and I was very angry at the friend who gave the person the info just to scare me. It wasn't funny."
- ♦ "Once I was on ICQ talking to a bunch of my friends when this guy I had been chatting with sent me a file. Unknowingly, I opened it and then I realized that the person had hacked into my system. Suddenly, my CD-ROM drive started opening and closing and annoying (but not threatening) messages started appearing on my screen. Soon after my mouse buttons switched functions. I had just finished a big assignment, so I was afraid the hacker would do something to wreck it. I shut down my computer and that was about all I did about it. One of my friends had a similar experience, only hers was scary and threatening. When she got hacked, pictures of a dead girl with her face smashed in appeared on her screen, along with threatening messages and sound clips."
- ♦ "I know this is normal in fact it doesn't bother me I just laugh. Most kids are always exposed to this stuff not just on the Internet so its no big deal in fact sometimes it makes it interesting. But one time this dude got really mad at me and he knew my parents were out of the state and he could have called one of my friends and found my address but instead he kept calling every 5 minutes...."
- ♦ "There was one time, when I got online to check my e-mail. I ended up going into my regular chatroom, and when I arrived, some guy started giving out my personal information. I don't know how he knew anything personal about me, but he was telling everyone in there about the frightening and terrible things that were done to me as a child. My best friend doesn't even know what happened to me when I was little. All I did was, denied all of what he said and logged off. I cried all week long."
- ♦ "This guy IM'd [instant messaged] me and my best friend and he knew all this information about us... and we hadn't even talked to him before. He knew who we were, where we lived and everything and he kept playing with our minds trying to tell us that we started IMing him first and so on. I told my parents about it but they didn't really care. So this went on for an hour and a half. I had friends try to get him to stop. He told us where he worked and he kept insisting that we go places with him like out to lunch or dinner and he would buy us x-mas and b-day presents even though we had never met him. He would leave them on his car at work for us to come and get, we would go get them and just smash them all over the ground... thinking he would get the point. He was convinced that him and my best friend were dating then I came along and I'm the one who stopped it all. No one could get this guy to stop. We changed our screen names plenty of times but he had

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already hacked into our account so he could always find us. Well he hacked into mine. Well in December we got a new computer and we both changed our screen names and he hasn't been able to find us since."

- ◆ "[A]bout a year ago I met a guy online and I told him my phone # and found out he lived about 5 minutes away from me we talked 4 about a week then he asked me out and I agreed. We met up at the mall he was totally normal 15 year old guy. He wasn't some psycho or anything but I got in a lot of trouble from my parents and I will never give out any personal information again. It's not safe and its a stupid idea. If anyone who reads this is thinking about giving out info to someone on the net PLEASE think twice about it you could get yourself into a lot of trouble."
- ◆ "I received a threatening E-mail from someone on my E-mail address. I immediately changed my password, and made sure that I didn't have information on my profile. I never E-mailed the person back, since that is what lets them know your account is active and they can find out more about you. Then, I decided to make sure about it, and stopped checking my E-mail account. I just got a new one."
- ◆ "I was in a chat room once and this person was threatening to kill themselves, and I find that scary. So I IM'd them not to do it, and I chatted with them for a while, and made them feel better about themselves, and promise not to do anything drastic. And they did promise."
- ◆ "I told these people to leave this foreign guy alone because they were making fun of him. They were calling him names and mocking everything he said. The people I got smart with told me I better watch my back because they could find out where I lived. That's why I left."

It would be interesting to ask your children to reply to the same questions. You might learn something about your children you didn't know.

For help or more information, visit WiredSafety.org or Parry's website, aftab.com, or her blog and Internet safety podcast, parryaftab.blogspot.com.