

## The MySpace Generation Lives on the Internet

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Media reports of sexual predators lurking on MySpace abound. Dateline's "To Trap a Predator" is a big hit. The Times' two-part series on Internet pedophiles highlighted the dangers of Internet child pornography. As the Net Generation camps in front of their computers, parents worry about their safety. Are their fears justified? A quick perusal of MySpace news reads like a doomsday forecast. Sexual predators run amok.

Cyberbullies abound. Pornography is everywhere. It is dangerous and bad for our children. It is a den of iniquity. One MySpacer travels to Jordan to meet her "boyfriend" while another is accosted by someone she met online. Several have been murdered by people they met on MySpace. Each occurrence paints the culprit as MySpace.

MySpace is an amazing online phenomenon that has skyrocketed from a small, music-oriented social network to a major virtual world for more than 105 million people. In July 2006, comScore's Media Matrix reported that MySpace had 54.5 million unique visitors, making it the sixth most frequented website. For its size, it is now the 11<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. As such, it is hardly surprising that some members may become victims of sexual exploitation. The question is: are our adolescents truly at risk?

I have examined the “psychology of technology” among children and adults for the past 22 years. I have studied more than 20,000 people in the United States and 23 other countries with my most recent work centering on adolescents on MySpace. Between March and June 2006 I interviewed 1,527 MySpace teens and 267 of their parents. What I found does not foretell disaster. Rather it paints a picture of one generation who is using a social networking tool to communicate and grow in a safe, shielded environment and another who cower in fear and are, for the most part, clueless about what their children are doing in cyberspace.

What did I learn from my interviews? First, adolescents and young adults are mostly using MySpace to communicate. Given two-parent and single-parent working families, teens are not being allowed to gather at the usual places – malls, playgrounds, etc. So, they are talking online. Second, they are making friends. Whether these are “close friends” or acquaintances, the average MySpacer lists 200 friends with whom he or she communicates about two hours a day. Third, having these friends appears to benefit the teen to be more honest, feel more understood, and even feel less shy than in the real world.

Fourth, my work, plus a five-year national study by Crimes Against Children Research Center and The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, shows that sexual solicitations are, in fact, down over the past 5 years. More importantly, adolescents are quite adept at handling these occurrences with little or no upset. For example, according to the CACRC report, in 2000, 79% of the pre-teens and teens dealt with the solicitation

appropriately by blocking the person or removing themselves from the situation; in 2005 this increased to 93%. Similar numbers were found for handling cyberbullying (an increase from 60% to 74%). Equally important, three-fourths of teens were simply not upset by the episodes of solicitation or harassment. From my research, the longer a teen is on MySpace and the more friends they have accumulated, the better they are at dealing with these potentially uncomfortable situations responsibly and with ease.

Research does indicate that MySpace may have some negative aspects. It appears that excessive time spent online may be weakly related to depression, reduced self-esteem and Internet addiction. However, these problems pale in comparison to the potential benefits from having opportunities to explore adolescent identity online in a relatively safe environment that is “behind the screen.”

What is more alarming is the parents’ seeming lack of attention to their teen’s MySpace usage. One third have never seen their child’s MySpace page and most others do not view it more than once every few months. Half of the teens have a computer in their bedrooms. Less than half of the parents have limits on Internet use, but children say those limits are not followed. Parents think there are many sexual predators on MySpace; the teens say encounters are rare. Parents think the media coverage of MySpace predators is accurate; teens think it is overblown.

The major issue that arose from my interviews is that parents simply ignore their children’s activities on MySpace. They allow their teenagers to spend many hours a day

closeted in their bedrooms with few, if any, limits. This is particularly striking given that through the media parents are convinced that MySpace is ripe with sexual predators.

Friendship is an important aspect of adolescent growth. Friends listen and provide support, all of which lead to a sense of well-being and mental health. Given the amount of time teens spend on the Internet, and the limited time they have for face-to-face activities, MySpace serves three valuable functions. First, it allows the teen to keep in touch with current friends, both from school and other parts of life. Second, it gives adolescents an opportunity to make friends among people that they might never have met if not for the Internet. Finally, through various communication tools, MySpace provides a 24-hour network, where a friend is always there, ready to talk. Adolescents are working on their teen angst online and MySpace is helping out.

These are all incredibly valuable functions in the teen's struggle to find a sense of identity and self through adolescence and to answer the all-important teen question, "Who AM I?"