



SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Facebook.com, MySpace.com and other similar sites are designed to allow people to share their creativity, pictures, and information with others. Sometimes people do this to find romance or to find friends with similar interests. MySpace.com is open to **any user over the age of 14**. The “high school” version called Facebook is somewhat more selective in its sign-up process and targets students at the high school level. While these rules may be set to keep younger children off the site, children cannot be prevented from lying about their age and pretending to be 14 years of age or older.

Facebook.com requires that its users have an invitation to join. To be a member of a particular high school’s Facebook, a student must be issued an invitation from an existing member. The invitation is issued through e-mail. The student responds and enters the required information. The final step in the registration requires that the student receive confirmation to the e-mail address that was entered.

WHAT DO I AS A PARENT NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THESE SITES?

1. If you’ve never seen one of these sites, go to MySpace.com and set up an account. Once you have an account, you can go through the site and see the ways children are using it. You will probably be surprised.
2. Find out if your children have a “space.” Ask your children (or do a search from within the sites). Sometimes, a Google Search on your children’s first and last name will return surprising results!
3. If your children have a space, ask to see it. Remove pictures and personal information from that site.
4. Discuss with your children the dangers that are associated with providing pictures and personal information in the online environment. Some children know that they should not share personal information, in an effort to protect themselves they make up information and post it online. This too may be dangerous. Discuss safe ways your children may communicate and share with others without providing misleading or potentially dangerous information.
5. If you discover that your children are posting provocative comments or inappropriate images online, it is time for the tough talk—the one about stranger dangers and how that cute fourteen-year-old boy your daughter met online may not be cute, may not be fourteen and may not be a boy! (Parents of young boys need to understand that their children are equally at risk. About one-third of the cases of Internet sexual exploitation are men exploiting boys.) Our children need to realize that there are real risks relating to meeting strangers offline, including murder.

The first confirmed murder victim by an Internet sexual predator was thirteen when she died in May, 2002. The risks are real, no matter how smart, sophisticated or tech-savvy your children are.

T.E.S.T.

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