What you need to know about Social Networking

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Having three children of my own, with two of them now being young adults, I always wanted to keep up with their cyberspace social interaction. After reading numerous articles on the social interaction of young people via the internet I decided to make my findings available to other parents and adults interested in becoming more familiar with the nature and the fundamentals of Social Networking. In other words, with more clarity, the goal of this article is twofold: one, without demonizing the social networks, to make the parents and the students aware of its dangers when used inappropriately and second, to provide some basic information on how to safely surf the cyber-space.

What is Social Networking?

Social networking is a way of connecting people in the virtual world. It exploded in recent years being used mainly for connecting people in both a personal and professional contexts. Across the world there are now a large number of public and private online social networks, with the best-known including Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is one of the largest sites, with over 300 million registered users.

Usually free to join and open to young people and adults (Facebook has a minimum age limit of 13 for registered users) social networking sites allow registered members to set up personal profiles and then communicate with friends, and, if they choose, with other unknown individuals who share their personal interests. A user will have their own home page, with personal details (age, location, marital status, for example) alongside a picture and other information about themselves - the music they like, their favourite movie, the football team they support, etc. They can then utilise their membership to send messages to friends, download games and applications, share photos and music downloads, and chat in real-time.

Users can also join groups, publicise events and invite other users to attend, or start their own blogs. In the case of Facebook and Twitter, they can also provide frequent status updates, broadcasting to those in their networks what they're up to and especially how they're feeling at certain moments in time. Perhaps most importantly, members create a listing of friends which allows them to communicate online and gives mutual access to more private content (such as photos!).

Why Parents should be concerned?

Privacy

Privacy is always a concern for any communication exchange carried out online and children/teenagers often do not understand the risks involved in giving out too much personal information on the Internet (address, date of birth, personal photos etc.). This is of particular worry when such information is made available to individuals who the child/teenager does not know personally; they may argue that someone is an online 'friend' but to all intents and purposes that person is basically a stranger.

To many young people the online world isn't the same as the real world and they can often behave in a way they would never do face to face, and say things they would never say, leaving them much more vulnerable in an online environment. As mentioned above, they

may also be less protective of personal details such as their mobile phone number or address, which could have undesirable implications or consequences for them.

Parents, teenagers and young adults need to be very wary of broadcasting events such as birthday parties or "the weekend mum and dad are away" to their online friends. In the US there have been several news headlines involving children who have posted details of house parties on social networking sites and found their event invaded by hundreds of unknown people, ending in chaos and police involvement.

To read more on the topic of internet privacy go to:

http://blog.sgrouples.com/top-5-online-privacy-myths-about-social-media-debunked/

Cyber-bullying

Unfortunately some users can harness social networking sites to carry out cyber-bullying where malicious comments are posted online about an individual and/or that user receives abusive messages or other content. In the American secondary schools this seems to be the most frequent type of bullying resulting in fights, personal socio-emotional distress, severe depression and sometimes acts of suicide.

Some tech-savvy users may even be able to hack into another user's account to harass them so it's important that parents and teenagers are aware of these dangers and understand they must be reported as soon as possible.

As social networking allows people to take on a different online persona, this can encourage individuals who wouldn't be a bully in the real world to take part in unpleasant activities because their real identity can be covered up.

Cyberbullying in the News:
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/cyberbullying/index.html

Cyberstalking

Another risk is that of cyber-stalking, or harassment on the Internet. Recent investigations on the frequency of this type of internet activity, warns that this unpleasant practise is set to continue to increase in the US and the UK, with most victims being female. Cyber-stalking via social networking sites usually falls into three categories:

- Ex-boyfriend/girlfriend pursues the victim because they are angry about a relationship break-up;
- A relationship has been initiated online and personal information has been exchanged but that relationship has now gone bad and those personal details become vulnerable;
- Someone is the random victim of a cyber-stalker and their pursuer just gets a kick out of it.

The link below shows a typical example of a cyberstalker:
http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/12-year-sentenced-washington-cyberstalking-case/story?id=14072315

Age-inappropriate content

The Internet provides access to all kinds of content at the click of a mouse - but not all of that content is suitable for children and young people to see. While you may have the appropriate parental controls set up on your computer your child may still be able to access inappropriate material if someone in their social networking circle makes it available to them.

Often young adults will ask parents for a cell phone with data plan. They can access this way any websites they want, including pornography, without parental knowledge.

For example, there is this cool smart phone app Snapchat, which allows people to send pictures and videos that only last a few seconds before disappearing. Because of the picture/video disappearing feature, teenagers may be inclined to use it for sexting, figuring that it's no problem if they take sexy pictures or videos, because they won't last.

To read more about this topic go to: http://techday.com/netguide/news/the-dangers-of-snapchat/166511/

Online grooming

The most distressing threat to a young person's safety on social networking sites is that of online grooming. Sadly the opportunity for anonymity that the Internet offers means that paedophiles use social networks and chat rooms to befriend children and teenagers. Their scope is to gain their trust online with plans for eventually making actual physical contact with that child.

They use highly deceptive means (pretending they are the same age as the child they are communicating with) and they will eventually find out information about that child - where they hang out, which school they attend etc. Once a predator has gained the trust of a child they turn from 'buddy to bully', exposing them to inappropriate sexual imagery and content, and manipulating them into doing what they want.

This is a recent case of online grooming. Please see link below:
http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/fake-justin-bieber-robert-hunter-2277377

Identity theft

Identity theft isn't limited to adults and now that more and more children and young people are using the Internet regularly they are becoming more vulnerable to this very serious crime. The naive posting of personal details on your child's social networking profile leaves them open to online identity theft so it's absolutely vital your child never gives out personal details in any online context, including their address, phone numbers, email, and, if they are older, any bank or credit card information.

You can read more about the worldwide spreading of Identity Theft here:
http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/social-media-enables-cyber-criminals-to-build-profiles-for-identity-theft/story-fnihsrf2-1226723950119

Emotional implications

In addition to the above it's worth considering how your child may be impacted emotionally by frequent usage of social networking sites. Recent articles have warned that

sites like Facebook can have a negative effect on children who are less confident and self-confident, as they can equate their happiness and success as individuals with how many friends they have on Facebook. Even if a child isn't being bullied as such, they can experience self-esteem issues if their online network isn't as big as their friends, or they have been excluded from a certain online group.

There are also concerns that young people are substituting their online relationships for physical ones, by spending more time in front of the computer than they do in the real world. And by not having to work at friendships, ironing out problems together when they arise - as is the case in the real world (on social networking sites you simply delete someone from your list of friends) - there is a worry that young people are losing their empathy and not developing the social and emotional skills necessary they'll need as adults.

A recent article published on the American Psychological Association website brings to light the harmful effects of social networking on the teenagers' emotional and social wellbeing: http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2011/08/social-kids.aspx

How do I Protect my child on social networking sites?

It would be logical to pull the plug on the home computer and to cancel the data plan after reading the above list of potential threats to your children while using social networking sites. And yet it's important to consider how online communication in one form or another is shaping our children's future. Studies suggest that the internet activity of young people will increase significantly during the next decade becoming an integral part of their daily life.

We also have to remember that most children and young people will have a positive, enjoyable experience when they access their social networking site. However it is essential to supervise your child's activity to an appropriate extent, without your child feeling you are trying to spy on them. Obviously much will depend on your child's age and it becomes trickier to supervise your child once they reach their teens.

By setting some ground rules on home internet usage and showing some interest and understanding of your child's online activities you'll be helping to ensure their online experiences are as safe and happy as possible. There is no reason why parents should not have a Facebook account and be able to "befriend" their own children online. This is not just recommended but also evidence of responsible parenting. Ultimately, the question still remains: "Who pays the bill?"

General tips for parents

1. **Take** a look at or sign up for some of the social networking sites to get a feel for what they're all about. It's important that parents don't feel left behind by new technologies, or intimidated by them because they think they're not aimed at an older user. Parents will feel much more comfortable about their children using social networking sites if they understand some of the terminology and how it works.
2. **Take** a good look at the privacy information or safety tips provided on the social networking sites themselves. This will provide a clear idea about how each site would help if the child was the victim of online bullying, for example, or what measures they have taken to protect the child's privacy.

3. **Engage** with your children about their experiences on the Internet, without making it seem like you're snooping on them. Have honest and open discussions on the content of this article. Show interest in their online activities so they feel comfortable about sharing experiences with you. This way your child will not feel worried about speaking to you should any issue or problem arise, such as online bullying or being sent inappropriate content.

4. **Try to** set limits together with your children on Internet usage at home. Explain why it's not a good idea for children to spend inordinate amounts of time in front of a screen, be it TV, games console or computer. Make sure you explain once more the need of house rules on how the Internet is to be used at home.

5. **Help** your child to feel confident about their place in the online community. Make sure that, just as in the real world, it's important they never follow the herd if they're uncomfortable about doing something. Peer pressure can make children publish information they may not wish to broadcast, such as the location and date of a forthcoming birthday party. And just because another person is happy to make provocative statements about themselves online, or portray themselves in a risqué manner, it's important your child realises they don't have to follow suit.

Tips for staying safe on social networking sites

1. Ensure your child is the minimum age required to join a social networking site.

2. Aside from standard software tools and parental controls you may already have to filter out inappropriate emails and websites from your computer, you may like to consider installing a tool that allows you to monitor your child's online activity, limit the amount of time they spend online and even block their ability to send out personal information.

3. Never give out personal details such as addresses or mobile phone numbers on social networking sites. It's also best if your child doesn't use their real name on their profile.

4. Be very wary of accepting friends who you do not know personally.

5. **Try to use a 'disposable' email address for registering with social networking sites and avoid using your real name for the address. Hotmail or Yahoo provide free email addresses.**

6. **Use 'strong' passwords** and ensure your child never discloses their password to anyone, even a close friend.

7. Be very selective about uploading images, status updates and messages, even among trusted friends. Once circulated online, images can be shared widely and can be extremely difficult to block or remove.

8. **Your child should never agree to meet a stranger they've been communicating with online.**

9. Make sure your child is aware of the safety functions they can employ when using social networking sites. Many of these will have a 'block' function to stop unwanted contact with another user.

10. Your child should always tell you if they come across anything they find upsetting or offensive while using social networking sites. Equally if they or you suspect your child may be the victim of any form of online harassment or grooming, you need to seek help immediately. Inform the local authorities!

11. If your child is the victim of any form of harassment or abuse, ensure you keep a record of all communication to pass over to the relevant bodies.