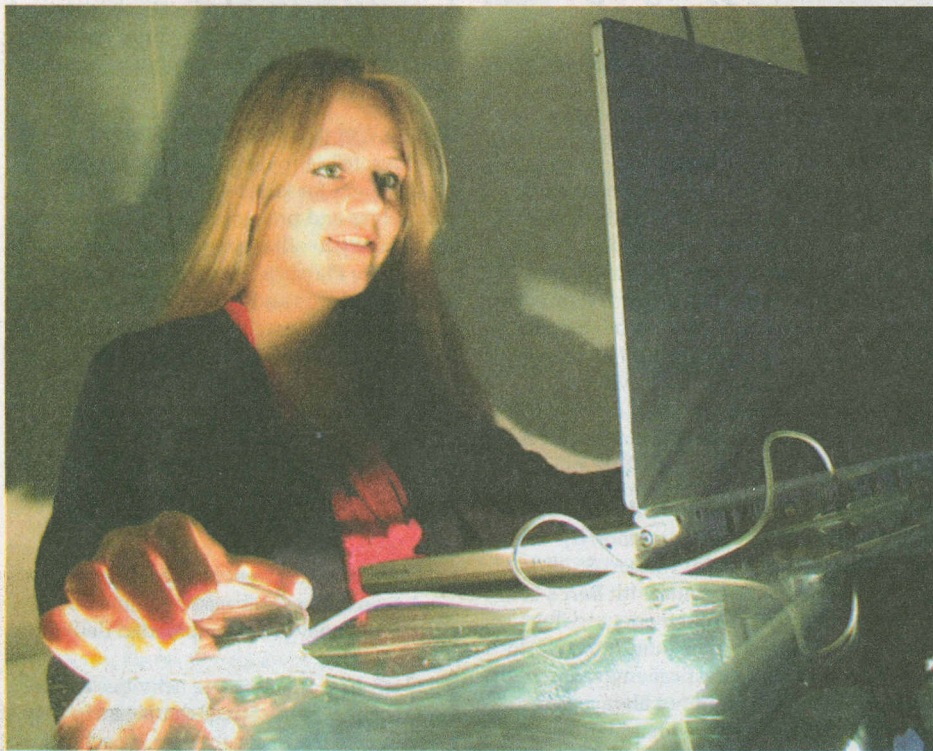


The Pros & Cons of Your Child's Online Identity

by Lucy Rimalower, M.A.



Eight weeks into summer and you're baffled by your teen's insistence on spending her days devoted to the computer. You beg and plead with her to enjoy the beautiful sunshine, to make plans with a friend, to see a movie. She refuses. She thinks she has all the connection she needs at her desktop. MySpace and Facebook have her chatting with all her friends, sharing music, pictures, and gossip and even making new friends. Uh, oh. Safety, safety, safety. But before you throw away your family computer and lock your teen in her room, let's consider the possible benefits of creating an online identity.

The Pros

As adolescents and teens grapple with who they are and what they want for their lives, having an online profile allows them to try on different identities through self-expression and the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers. According to a 2007 survey by Cox Communications, 71% of teens, ages 13 to 17, have created online profiles on social networks like MySpace or Facebook.

And, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 91% of teens with an online profile use it to "stay in touch with friends [they] see a lot."

Here's the good news: a study last month from the University of Minnesota found that the use of social networking sites actually helps teens develop vital 21st century skills in technology, communication and creativity. Further, research from the MacArthur Foundation showed how social networking sites foster the development of "New Media Literacy," as online teens develop the ability to network, negotiate and multitask, among other valuable skills. As for the short-term benefits, these sites can help teens to feel connected, to manage their friendships and to share ideas, a dynamic I've observed with the teens in my practice. The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 39% of teens post their artistic or creative work online. Creating content or a profile online can be a positive, identity-affirming experience, with, of course, parental guidance and the appropriate privacy settings for safety.

The Cons

The internet is like a playground in a public park. There are stranger dangers along with friendly children and fun activities. But unlike leaving the park for the day, your profile stays online even after the computer is turned off. 58% of teens surveyed said they don't think it's unsafe to post pictures and personal information online (Cox Communications, 2007). It's imperative to help teens understand that they cannot control information about themselves once it's been posted online or even emailed. They may take down photos or remove comments, but as easily as you can copy and paste in an email, profiles can be copied and pictures downloaded. Ask your teens if they have received messages from strangers, experienced bullying or harassment or considered meeting in-person someone they met online. Ask your teen what privacy settings they have turned on for profiles, pictures, and videos. Let them know that when they share information online, just like in the public park, they are visible to strangers and vulnerable to unwanted attention.

Cyber-bullying

Teens also need to know that online communication can be as powerful and painful as talking in-person. Internet harassment or cyber-bullying can range from teasing, nasty comments and vicious rumors to dangerous threats. Let your teen know that harassing another person or being harassed, sexually or otherwise, is not acceptable. While teens get a break from the pressures of high school and junior high during the summer, cyber-bullying has no summer break and can go on 24 hours a day. It may be easy for a bully to forget the impact he has on his victim when they don't see each other face to face. If your teen receives a threatening or harassing message, he should print it out and give it to you. You can contact law enforcement if necessary.

On June 30, 2008, Missouri Governor Matt Blunt took a step towards outlawing cyber-bullying by updating a state law to include telephone, texting and computer communications as harassment. This measure was taken after a teen killed herself after she was harassed on MySpace. The woman accused of perpetrating this harassment was tried in Los Angeles, where MySpace is headquartered, which may expedite the implementation of similar laws in California. Regardless, it is incumbent upon parents to be vigilant about monitoring the use of the internet by their children and teens.

Making It Better

Teens go online in multiple venues, including computers at home, school, friends' houses, and other places where you can't monitor every keystroke. A key finding to keep in mind is that family conversations

about online profiles and activity reduce teens' vulnerability to internet risks, according to Cox Communications' recent survey. To prepare for a conversation with your teen about his online activity, which may be an integral part of his social life, you are best served to be well versed or at least familiar with the popular sites. While you may jeopardize your teen's trust if you sign onto her account/online profile without her permission, you might be better equipped to have a discussion once you've visited www.myspace.com or www.facebook.com. Try filling out a profile to see what prompts for information and safety settings are available. Your teen may be a networking prodigy but he may not have the practical experience to know what information not to share. Help your teens understand the potential dangers of posting certain kinds of information online, including: age (real or fake!), full name, city of residence, name of school, cell phone number, address, personal photos of self or friends, social security number.

"Ugh- Mom!" may be the response from your teenager who is terribly bothered by your interest in his very personal online activities. But, even if your teen is just talking with his friends online, opening up a dialogue about online identity may be an effective and nonjudgmental way to guide your teen to take responsibility for his online

behavior. Help your teen consider that online profiles and other created content such as blogs are like his own personal media. An online profile, like a TV show or movie, can tell a story about him. A profile can also be an advertisement. Ask him what features of himself the profile "advertises." Ask your teen what kind of person might be interested in perusing his profile. What distinguishes his online identity from his real-life identity? Again, all of these questions may be received with a blank stare or a roll of the eyes but you've planted the seeds and opened the door for communication about online safety.

Simple Steps for Online Safety at Home

- Keep the computer in a common area, rather than in a more private space.
- Set internet hours and time limits.
- Engage your teens in discussions about what websites and networking sites they frequent.
- Remind your teen never to give passwords away, even to close friends.
- Encourage your teen to share online profiles with you. If you're lucky enough to see your teen's profile, offer feedback through the lens of safety, not criticism.
- Teach your teens to be critical consumers of media, questioning the safety, security and legitimacy of information and connections they find on the internet.

The internet is inextricably linked to your

teen's future, personally and professionally. Teach them good habits now so they can reap the benefits of being smart, safe consumers of new media.

RESOURCES

Here are some websites that provide helpful information regarding internet safety:

<http://www.connectsafely.org/code/code/>

<http://www.isafe.org/>

<http://www.netsmartz.org/safety/safetytips.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia/resources.html>

<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/teens/index.html>

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/internet101/blogs.html>

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