

Myspace.com is latest threat to 'Generation @'

By Chris Birke--Editor

It's a child predator's dream and a parent's nightmare. It's called Myspace.com and teenagers are into it—big time.

The website, which promotes itself as "a place for friends," is one of several online hangouts drawing millions of teens. Brett was one of them.

The 16-year-old New Albany, Ind., boy logged onto the site regularly after school, wrote a few lines in his blog (web diary) and chatted online with his "Myspace friends."

His parents were clueless.

"I thought he was doing his homework," said Brett's mom, Melanie. "Turns out he would minimize the screen just before I'd poke my head around the corner to check on him."

Melanie woke her husband at 1 a.m. when she uncovered Brett's secret blog and profile on Myspace.

"I came across soft-core pornography and vulgarities," she said. "After I saw what was on that website I wanted to throw up."

Rachel Loy, coordinator of the Conscience in the Community Ministry at Southeast, said parents are waking up to the content of websites like Myspace—laced with sexually explicit language and images.

"And then there's the added danger that many of these teens are putting information on these sites that a predator can use to track them down," she said.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports one in five children who regularly use the Internet have been solicited sexually.

Myspace is among the sites becoming known as a smorgasbord for predators, and the site already has made startling headlines.

Eight adolescent girls recently claimed they were assaulted by men they met on Myspace.



Apparently the girls, ages 12-16, revealed too much about themselves on the website. All the girls expected to meet boys their age and instead met adult men who had lied to them. One of the men traveled more than a thousand miles for the meeting.

Last month, a 16-year-old girl in Lafayette, La., was attacked by a 37-year-old man who tracked her down after reading her profile on Myspace.

In September, a 17-year-old in Vienna, Va., was killed by a man after her MySpace blog revealed how to find her.

Myspace is among a handful of networking/relationship sites now popular with teens. Other sites include Xanga.com, Friendster.com and Facebook.com.

The free sites ask users to sign up and create personal profiles complete with digital photos and answers to questionnaires.

Members of Myspace—by far the most popular of the sites—are encouraged to receive "visits" from users they don't know.

Myspace, which began as a site for musicians to market their music, has grown into the world's fifth-largest website, boasting more than 54 million users. And the site gains thousands of new members every day.

If they haven't yet, Loy said, it's time parents come to grips with dangers on the Internet, especially now as the social blog phenomena spreads like a virus among young people who some are calling "Generation@."

Melanie agrees. She said she's overheard "very dedicated Christian" teens talk about their Myspace accounts.

"They think these sites are just a way to meet people. They have no idea who they're really chatting with," Melanie said. "When I checked out the contents of Myspace, I felt like Satan had won a victory over my son. We pulled the plug on his account because we love our son. And we now monitor all of his Internet use."

Tony Gore, a counselor in the Counseling Ministry at Southeast, said parents have a right and responsibility to monitor the media their children use and said that in extreme cases parents should take extreme measures.

"Families that are having pornography problems need to consider a variety of options, including getting rid of the Internet altogether if they can't monitor their kids' activities," he said.

The follow guidelines reduce the risk of children seeing sexually explicit material or falling victim to sexual predators.

- * Keep the computer in an area where an adult can watch where they're surfing
- * Restrict Internet use to when a parent is home

- * Install software that blocks sexually explicit sites

- * Warn children never to post personal information

Loy stressed that parents need to understand that allowing unrestricted Internet access to children is extremely risky.

"Giving your child access to an unfiltered Internet is like letting him wander the aisles of a department store in which a third of its shelves are stocked with pornography," she said. "They will stumble across it."

Editor's note: Some last names in this article were omitted to protect the family's privacy.

Special Note:

Shortly after this article was email to a mom: "You would not believe it but this evening, I was emptying my son's school bag when I came across a small white card, offering to "Win an IPOD" by logging on to

WWW.MYSPACE.COM

My jaw hit the ground having just received your email yesterday (2 Mar 2006)!"

E-mail Chris Birke at cbirke@secc.org

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