

SOCIAL NETWORKING BEHAVIORS – What Middle Level Students Don't Know!

At a recent presentation to 450 sixth graders at a school in South Central Pennsylvania I asked the audience “How many of you are 14 years old”; not a hand was raised. I then asked “How many of you have a MySpace page?” over 300 hands were energetically and rather proudly raised! They beat the system! Students must be 14 to have a MySpace page and they all had one! They were so proud but failed to realize all the dangers they now faced. They think they were being so shrewd in the development of their MySpace page, by lying here and there to cover their true identity, how naïve! No matter where I speak, these results are invariable. Let's be pragmatic you are never going to prevent your students from going into the Social Network arena, it is far too trendy; you would have a better chance of convincing them to change their style of dress! Middle Level students must be made aware of the dangers they face and the mistakes they are making.

By their very nature Social Networking sites are set up to allow people to meet and become friends with another person, however, there are people out there whose intent is not to meet someone their own age but to prey upon kids, especially vulnerable are the Middle Level student when they try to lie their way through these sites. Over the past few years we have read and heard of many cases involving children falling prey to unscrupulous people via on-line "meetings". It started in chat rooms with students victimized by these internet fishermen; getting caught with their baited phrases. Students were also giving away information about themselves, where they live, what school they attend etc.; all the information needed for these stalkers to gather real time facts about the home area of their victim and then disguise themselves as a “local” and begin to lure the target into trusting them. Parents and teachers are more attentive to these dangers and are now taking a more active role in “monitoring” the on-line habits of their children and students. The problem, however, continues to exist due to the naivety of the Middle Level student who is smart enough to lie but not shrewd enough to be consistent when lying. How many times have you caught one of your students in a lie and chuckled to yourself of how little thought they put into the lie? Every predator knows that students will lie about the location of their home and their age on any site but when it comes to the “About Me” or profile section students tell the truth, consistently giving away school names, grade level, friends' names, and Instant Message screen names – all of which will give a predator all that is needed to make contact.

How can teachers bring the message that students' on-line behaviors are not as safe as the student may think? Take a look at where and how students are making the mistakes and bring this to their attention, maybe in this way we can help them help themselves when it come to being safe while on a Social Networking site. Here are what I consider to be some basic online behavior areas Middle Level students need to correct in order to increase their safety when using Social Networking sites.

First (Location& Age)

When registering in MySpace, many students will lie about their age and location only to tell the truth about themselves in the "About Me" section of their site. They basically lie in one area, then the aforementioned consistency factor comes into play, and they become inconsistent in their fabrications. Their mistake at this point is twofold; first and most significant is that early on in the registration process MySpace will ask the student for a name and email address for their records (which MySpace does not publish), but on the same form they ask for the student's ZIP CODE. Even though the zip code is not displayed, it can be used by a predator when using the BROWSE command to look for targets. All the predator need do is go to the BROWSE area of MySpace and search for members who live within X number of miles of a zip code. Most all Middle Level students who lie about their location on their page fail to realize they have listed their correct zip code as a search vehicle back in the registration process and again, given the Middle Level student's lack of shrewdness, they will not correlate the zip code with their fake hometown and state listing. Many will say they are from California but have registered with the zip code of 19XXX, their correct zip code. Secondly, they then proceed to post a picture of themselves which others can see does not match the age they listed. Also, in the question area of MySpace, students will list their School and attendance years. If they say they are 25 years old and list that they are attending XXXXX High School from 2007-2010 the discrepancy becomes laughable.

Second (URL Listing)

Another area where students make mistakes is in the listing of the URL. This is advertised with the "hook" that students can have their own internet address – www.myspace.com/XXXXXXXX where the XXXXXX's are of the student's own making. The example that is given is www.myspace.com/TOM (Tom is the creator of MySpace). So what do most Middle Level students do? They use their last name in the URL or they use some other identifier such as sports they play, team number, or their grade level. All of which are giving away information to a predator about the "target". It is most troubling when a student uses their Instant Message screen name, which leads to the third problem area.

Third (AIM)

Students need to realize by placing their AIM screen name in their URL, or even more obvious, posting it in the About Me section of MySpace with the phrase “IM me at xxxxxxxxx, they are allowing access to their AIM “Away Messages”. If their AIM properties are not set to “private”, ANYONE can use AIM to look up the BUDDY Information; being able to view, in real time, away messages posted by the student along with other information the student may have posted for their “friends” to see. In these away messages and postings students will often put where they are, what they are doing, and their cell or home phone for “friends” to call them.

After spending 35 years teaching Middle Level students I now travel across the US lecturing on these internet safety issues to Schools, PTOs, and Conferences, each time the students, teachers and parents are stunned to realize the vulnerability their kids have when they “talk” to strangers or post information on the internet. Students always tell me this is “stuff for my friends to see”. My answer is “the best thing you can do is lock up all the information by making **everything** PRIVATE. Remember you are not to use the Internet to meet NEW friends; you are just posting information for your CURRENT friends to see. Always keep in mind today’s friends may become tomorrow’s enemies; be careful what you post!”

For some reason technology has had a habit of pushing away the older population while enticing the younger generation. If you accept the premises that “the internet functions as an evolving picture of our civilization”, years from now what will society say about our current use of the internet? I trust it will be viewed as a time when we came to realize the inherent dangers faced by those who travel this informational highway and a time when we taught students to be aware of these dangers and educated them in how to protect themselves.

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Biography

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A graduate of Bloomsburg University, I have had 35 years teaching experience in the Council Rock School District at the Junior High/Middle Level; moving over from Science to Computer education in the early 1980's. My first venture of computer usage beyond the classroom was using "Prodigy" to establish an "Adopt a Grandparent" program between 8th grade students and a local Retirement Center. Over the years I have worked in the areas of "Telecomputing", Assistive Device Integration, Staff Training and Community computer classes. I have coached the Baseball, Softball and Wrestling teams at Holland Jr. I was also the Coach of the MathCounts Team from 1987-1991 and was lucky enough to have Holland Jr. High win 2 PA State Championships; Coached the PA State Team twice and also had one of my students win the 1989 National Championship.

Over ten years ago, while teaching middle school students and viewing the naïve behaviors that they exhibited on the internet, I developed lesson plans to teach students safe behaviors. As students spoke at home about what they were learning in school, parents began contacting me to speak at PTO meetings and to local organizations. Since that time, both use of the internet and the dangers that students face while using the internet have grown. Along with that growth, requests for me to speak on the topic of Internet Safety have increased. I now give presentations to schools across the US and at both State and National Conventions. Due to the demands for speaking engagements and my passion for changing the mindset of our young people as they communicate via the internet, I retired from Council Rock School District and now focus solely on doing presentations.

Awards

KEYSTONES MODEL PRACTICES AWARD – 2004

First Place Lesson Award 2005 Honeywell GOT 2B SAFE AWARDS PROGRAM

PRESENTATION EXPERIENCE

**To over 30,000 students at various school
Districts throughout the US**

- National Middle School Association Conference
- National Educational Computing Conference
- Pennsylvania Middle School Association Conference
- Nebraska Educational Technology Association Conference
- AAHPERD National Conference
- Pennsylvania Business Education Association Conference
- PA School Libraries/Public Libraries Cooperation State Conference
- Pennsylvania Education Technology Expo and Conference
- Congressman Fitzpatrick's Internet Safety Forums