

Parents, Children Cautioned when Using Social Web Sites

by Holly Pupino

BATH — When their children are toddlers, many parents build backyard fences to give their now-mobile tots boundaries.

Flash ahead a decade. The tots are now preteens wishing to join their friends — and millions of other Internet users worldwide — on the social networking Web site MySpace.

“As parents, you simply can’t put a fence around this and keep your children safe,” said Don Philabaum, an expert on online social networking. “Yet kids need to know that you are still responsible for them in the virtual world”

Philabaum spoke to parents from the Copley-Fairlawn City and Revere Local school districts April 23 at the Akron General Health & Wellness Center — West. His talk, “Facing up to the MySpace and Facebook Generation,” was sponsored by the Copley-Fairlawn and Revere chapters of C.A.R.E (Chemical Abuse Reduced through Education) The program also included small-group discussions with Ryan Lekan, a Revere Middle School teacher, and Duane Scott, a Copley Police D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) officer, who are educating middle school students about safe practices when communicating online through e-mail, instant messaging and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

Philabaum, a resident of Richfield, is president and chief executive officer of the Internet Association Corp. (IAC), a company that helps schools and colleges, nonprofit organizations and corporations use online social networking to communicate with key audiences, such as alumni and donors, and market products and services.

The explosion in information and communication technology has drastically changed the way young people communicate, said Philabaum. Increasingly, face-to-face communication is being replaced with text messages, cell phone conversations, instant messaging, blogs and “friend-to-friend” exchanges on Web sites, such as MySpace and Facebook.

According to Philabaum, 83 percent of all college students have Facebook accounts. Since MySpace was launched in 2004, it has grown to 130 million users, and the majority (57 percent) are not teens but adults between the ages of 25 and 55.

Young people enjoy MySpace because they can customize pages with color and graphics; add photos, music and videos; express their feelings in a daily format; build a “list” of friends; and leave messages for friends.

“Mostly they want to be there because they don’t want to be left out,” said Philabaum.

However, social networking poses several risks. There have been numerous news reports of Internet-related stalking and pedophiles posing as teens and luring minors to meet in person. There is increased risk for identity theft, defamation and posting text and photos that, in the future, could negatively impact opportunities for scholarships and employment. Most young people don’t realize that information placed on the Internet today will remain on the Internet for decades.

“Kids will say things they won’t say in person,” said Philabaum. “Boys get bolder and girls get bolder when they are not looking at each other eyeball to eyeball.”

Even young people who don’t post their own pages are at risk, said Philabaum. For example, a photo taken of an athlete holding a can of beer at a party can be posted on a classmate’s MySpace page, jeopardizing his eligibility. Pictures of a group of preteen girls dressing up and posing in provocative ways at a sleep-over can be posted without the knowledge or consent of all the girls or their parents.

“People want people to visit their sites and often accomplish this by using shocking photos,” said Lekan.

When local school administrators saw a student posing with a gun on a MySpace page, they notified his parents.

It proved to be a real gun that had been hidden in the home.

Because participation is free, teens may have numerous MySpace pages. Lekan told parents their teens may tell them about one profile page. But the teens may, in fact, have several others using different user names and passwords.

Scott said law enforcement agencies have been slow in adapting their crime investigation techniques to the online community. Many police departments don't have the funds for the training, and Internet crimes, such as cyber menacing, can require many hours of manpower.

Parents may not be able to build a fence to protect their children from all of the dangers imposed by the social networking sites, but Philabaum offered the following tips to reduce the risks:

- Create your own MySpace page. As a parent, you should be familiar with the site and its contents.
- Insist that you be listed as a "friend" on your child's friend list. You don't have to use your real name or photo (so as not to embarrass your child).
- Make sure your child's "profile" is hidden from public.
- Educate your child regarding the dangers of posting personal information, such as her phone number, address, school name, sports team or anything too revealing for strangers to know.
- Teach your child to accept friends cautiously.
- Talk to your child about the value of real friends vs. the 600 "friends" on their MySpace list.
- Insist that your child behave online as he is expected to behave offline.
- Remind your child to think before joining online groups. A group name that may be funny to some can be hurtful to others.
- Keep computers in a public location in the home, such as the family room, rather than your child's bedroom.