

## Social Networking Tips for Parents

Many middle school students take part in social networking through Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. Although these sites are not harmful in and of themselves, they can do real harm to your children. With that in mind, I offer the following:

- (1) **Know the limits.** YouTube and MySpace have set a minimum age for use at 13. For Facebook, it's 14. These age limits make good sense. The nature and power of social networking can be overwhelming for younger children who may not understand or know how to deal with the implications of an online identity – especially one that is open to feedback, both positive and negative, from the public at large.
- (2) **Know your child's friends and/or subscribers.** Your child should be able to provide a real first and last name, how they know the person, and the town where someone lives for each person on their friend and/or subscriber list. If they can't do this, it may mean they have "friended" a stranger who may be hiding or lying about his or her identity, or who doesn't have a personal relationship with your child and thus would have less reason to be careful, thoughtful, or appropriate with his or her postings or other online behavior.
- (3) **Know your child's account information and password.** Don't just know these things, USE them. If you're not comfortable logging on to your child's account without his or her knowledge, sit down with them several times a week to see what they've done on line — what videos or photos they've posted, what they've commented on, whose accounts they've viewed, who their new subscribers/friends are, and who's pages they've subscribed to or friended. Use these times to talk about their choices, the possible impact of their postings, and the image they are presenting of themselves.
- (4) **Know your settings.** Every social networking site has privacy settings. I did an experiment to see how many St. Peter's children I could find and view online. It was easy enough to find one student; by looking at that student's friends/subscribers I found dozens more. I was able to see their videos, read their "walls" and generally lurk, undetected, on their pages. That should creep you out.

Each site has a privacy/safety area (see next page). Go to it, read it, watch the videos, talk to your children. Make sure they (and you) know how to "block" people, restrict an account so that only people they know can have access, and report others that violate the "safe community" standards.

# Privacy Information for Social Networking Sites

YouTube:

[http://www.google.com/support/youtube/bin/request.py?contact\\_type=abuse&hl=en\\_US](http://www.google.com/support/youtube/bin/request.py?contact_type=abuse&hl=en_US)

MySpace:

[http://www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=cms.viewpage&placement=safety\\_pagehome](http://www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=cms.viewpage&placement=safety_pagehome)

Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation.php>

(Facebook has updated their privacy settings so that the pages of members under age 18 are restricted to “friends” and “friends of friends” by default. Those settings cannot be changed; however many children lie about their age when they sign up, and the “friends of friends” category is a significantly large group of people.)

## Other Resources

On Guard Online (Parents)

<http://www.onguardonline.gov/>

Free download: *Net Cetera: Chatting with Kids about Being Online*

Cyber Bully 411 (Kids and parents)

<http://cyberbully411.org/>

Stan Davis, Stop Bullying Now

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/>

Dina DiRenzo, LCSW

Catholic Charities

School-Based Family Support Program

(856) 366-0331

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