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'MySpace' could be 'TheirSpace'

Mike Griffin, Guest Columnist

"Parents need to understand that anytime they let their kids go online alone, it's as if they allowed a stranger into their child's bedroom and the stranger closed the door."

Daniel Weiss, senior analyst for media and sexuality at Focus on the Family - Action.

There is a new trend and a craze that is sweeping across this country where even 12-16 year olds are now hosting their own personal Web pages or "blogs" as they are commonly called.

Such Web sites as MySpace, Xanga, Face Book and Friendster have become popular sites for middle and high school students to display their interests and popularity to other students.

Many young girls see it as a great way to meet boys and are flattered by the interest they are receiving. It has become a way for young people to brag and compare how many contacts, friends, and links they have on "their" Web site.

It is my understanding that these types of web sites have become a great interest even to Hart County youth and it is even being encouraged by some adults in our area who work with our youth.

While any young person's interest and work with a computer is to be encouraged and commended, it is not to go without saying that this interest has become one of the most dangerous areas a child or young person could be left alone with today.

Take for example a report I read the other day on Focus on the Family's Web site, Citizen Link. It was reported that seven underage girls in Connecticut have been assaulted by men whom they met by way of their personal Web pages.

In January of this year, a 14-year old girl was found murdered in Newark, N.J., and in February, a 15-year-old was found dead in Livermore, Calif. According to the newspaper, The Baptist Courier, officials have linked MySpace with both deaths.

You see, the MySpace sites are becoming the space of choice for sexual predators!

Paul Bishop, a Los Angeles detective, told USA Today that when it comes to these types of crimes, "a case that doesn't have a connection to the Internet is rare."

I challenge concerned parents to "log on" to any of these sites and see for themselves how vulnerable our young people are making themselves to the worst perverts of our society.

Imagine how it would be if I went out on I-85, rented a billboard, and put your picture with your personal information for everyone to see 24 hours a day. I can't think of a parent who would want their child's biographical information on display like that!

Some may think this is too far away for us to worry about in good ol' Hart County.

Well, I hate to inform you, but it has already happened here - more than once! Already, unsuspecting young people have chatted on the Internet with predators who were posing as teenagers. One of these predators eventually came to this county and sexually assaulted one of the teenagers in their own home!

Recently, a local news channel did an investigation, demonstrating how easy it was to track down five unsuspecting young women using the information these women had posted on their web site. All were totally unaware of how easy it was for them to be contacted, even at their places of employment!

Reports state that predators only need a little information when it comes to tracking someone.

For example, just a picture with a town or school name is enough!

At the Web site I have seen, the young people are not only posting pictures of themselves, but they are posting pictures showing themselves dressed in swimsuits or even kissing someone else!

In another article I recently read, it stated that it is normal for teens to post cell phone numbers, school names and other information, along with inappropriate pictures of themselves.

MySpace has 55 million members. Can you imagine how many predators could be among that many people?

I was told recently by one law enforcement officer that as many as 50,000 predators could be searching the Internet at any given time of the day! The Internet has truly become a "pool of sharks" waiting to attack the innocent and unsuspecting!

I'm serious when I question whether or not a parent should even allow their child to have these web sites. Given the perverseness of our society, why take a chance, especially when such a site as MySpace could become TheirSpace, a predator's breeding ground?

I urge parents, please beware!

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