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Friends are everything to a teen. New technologies in the last few years have provided opportunities for teens to make “cyber” friends in addition to their real world friends. The very thought of “cyber” friends may produce uncertain images in the minds of parents. As with many issues in parenting, this is another area where parents need to gather more information and monitor what their teen does.

Social networking websites

MySpace and Facebook are two of the most popular general social networking websites. Social networking websites have wide appeal for teens with the number of users growing daily. In the 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Project – Teens and Social Media report, 55 percent of online teens have a personal profile on this kind of website. The websites combine many Internet features into one: personal profiles, blogs (web logs like an online diary or journal), places for photos and videos, the latest news in pop culture about music groups or hot new products, opinion polls, user groups, and more.

The most popular feature that social network sites provide is the personal profile. The sites provide many options for teens to create a page complete with pictures, interests, preferences and other information about themselves. Videos can be posted as well. Teens can allow as many or as few “friends” to view the page by the kinds of restrictions they choose. The tools to setup the page and determine who has access are easy to use with directions right on the website.

There are also many social networking websites which may appeal more to specific groups. For example, Flixster (<http://www.flixster.com>) focuses on movies.

Issues for parents and teens

Parents and caregivers need to know something about social networking sites. Check out a website (<http://www.myspace.com> or <http://www.facebook.com>) to experience what they look like and how they work. Look for what kinds of information people are posting including age, interests, and photos. Think about what



impression the information conveys.

Social networking websites have potential for both negative and positive consequences. These are public websites. Which means people of all ages, interests, and backgrounds have access to them. There are several areas of concern for both parents and teens.

- Safety is first and foremost. There are a number of cases where sexual predators have been able to identify and locate children and teens through the personal information that was posted.
- Information teens think would only be of interest to their friends can get in the hands of others with negative results. For example, news about a friend's personal life goes to others who use it to harass or bully the person.
- Employers find damaging information about the person's past as he/she looks for a job. Inappropriate information might be posted that leads computer hackers to alter the person's profile or access their computer.

Why are teens so attracted to social networking websites?

Certainly there are many adults who use social networking websites. But for parents who don't, the big question is why would teens put all of that

personal information on the Internet? It may help parents if they can understand the appeal that social networking websites and other web features have for teens.

Consider the world in which today's teens have grown up. The media has made very public the personal lives of well known people from entertainment, sports, and political circles. Celebrities live out their lives in the limelight. Other examples are TV reality shows many of which are popular with teens.

As mentioned earlier, friends are everything to a teen. As today's teens are growing up, they view the Internet as a place to "hang out" just as real world places are. Using the Internet to connect to friends they know in person and to make new friends is a natural step – it's just another way to communicate. Today's teens are a self-publicizing generation. It is natural for them to put information out there.

A normal developmental task for teens is figuring out their identity. For example, it is typical for teens to "try on" different identities through their clothing and hairstyle choices. Designing a webpage complete with favorite symbols, quotes, and pictures can also be viewed as a way to "try on" an identity, test an image, and get feedback from others.

Tips for parents

- Learn what your teen is doing on the Internet. One way is to ask your teen to help you with doing a task on the web.
- Help teens know what is appropriate to put on the web. They have the web knowledge but you have life experience.
- Be clear about what is not safe to post on the web: full name, address, specific places they go, phone numbers, ethnic background, and anything else that would help someone identify or locate them. Remind your teen that strangers and people they don't want accessing their information have the ability to do just that. Once something is posted on the web, it is no longer private.
- Stress that the rules of social networking sites must be followed. There are age limits on most sites.
- Establish limits on how much "screen time" your teen has including time at the computer, watching TV, or playing video games.
- Invite your teen to show you his/her web page. Give him/her a day or two of warning before looking at it.

Some teens may "rethink" what they have posted.

- Consider joining the same website your teen is on and setting up your own profile. That way your teen will be able to look at your profile and you will be able to ask to view his/her profile. Knowing this, teens will be much better at self – monitoring.

It's not all bad

Much of what is in the news recently about social networking websites has been negative. There are very serious privacy and safety issues. But, there are many positives things about these websites when used appropriately. Creation of a personal web page can be a very creative outlet for a teen. Frequent entries into an online blog can give teens practice in writing and expressing their thoughts and opinions. Through using technology, teens are learning how to manipulate and use large amounts of data and information to a higher degree than previous generations. Teens are also learning skills needed to build a website and use other technologies.

Where you can go for more information:

National Institute on Media and the Family

<http://www.mediafamily.org>

NetSmartz Workshop – Keeping Kids and Teens Safer on the Internet

<http://www.netsmartz.org>

Parenting Education Resources

<http://www.parenting.umn.edu>

Pew Internet and American Life Project – Teens and Social Media

http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Social_Media_Final.pdf

Teens and the Internet – Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/00145.pdf>

Web Wise Kids – Equipping Today's Youth to Make Wise Choices Online

<http://www.webwisekids.org>

WiredSafety – Keeping Kids and Teens Safe on MySpace, Facebook and other Networking Sites

<http://www.wiredsafety.org>

www.parenting.umn.edu

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