



So, your child wants a MySpace page...

Social networking websites have exploded all across the world and MySpace leads the way with over 110 million members. Although this article is going to focus on MySpace.com, there are many more social networking websites that are gaining popularity such as Friendster.com, Facebook.com, and Xanga.com.

I frequently get questions from parents about whether or not they should allow their children to create a MySpace page. While I believe MySpace does have some legitimate purposes that do allow people to reconnect and collaborate, there are without a doubt many dangers within an online community such as MySpace.

With over 60,000 new videos uploaded to MySpaceTV each day and over 1.5 billion total images on the site, it is impossible for MySpace to prescreen content before it is posted, leaving the possibility of your child accessing inappropriate material. In fact, MySpace doesn't prescreen any material that is uploaded; they do however perform random data checks and respond to concerns from members when they are reported.

It is possible for your child to have a safe MySpace page, but it's going to require open communication between you and your child about the dangers of the Internet and what your expectations are. In order to protect your child online, I recommend the following steps:

1. Follow MySpace's terms and conditions fully and ensure your child is at least 14 years old. Anyone under 14 years old will be removed if located by MySpace or law enforcement.
2. Don't allow your child to misrepresent their age. MySpace will automatically set a profile to private for anyone under 18, which is what you want.
3. Your child should not be allowed to add anyone as a friend who you don't know. It should either be family or friends that you have actually met. It is far too easy for a sexual predator to pose as another student and get added as a friend. There is no point to having a profile set to private if just anyone is allowed to be added as a friend.
4. No images that are provocative should be posted. Review each and every image that is posted for content. This should include the background of the pictures; are there addresses, license plates, school signs, street signs, or anything else that can reveal who your child is, where they live, work or go to school?

5. Information that is posted should be vague. For example the city and state that is shown to all users should be something like "Oregon" or "Southern Oregon" but avoid naming the actual city.
6. If you visit the MySpace settings section of your child's profile you can customize all different types of security options and features. Specifically, if you choose the Privacy section of the profile you can customize your child's account settings and this helps to prevent some personal information from being readily accessible to others. For instance, you can unselect "show people when I am online" to prevent persons from knowing when you child is online. Also you can unselect "show my birthday to my friends" that way persons cannot view the month, day and year that your child was born.)
7. Don't allow the posting of anything such as family member names, addresses, phone numbers, school schedules, e-mail addresses, etc.
8. Make sure your child understands that any comments they leave on other MySpace pages may be read by other people. If they comment on someone else's page with their schedule or phone number it may be used by a sexual predator.
9. Make sure the profile identifying picture your child uses (also known as the avatar) is not a close up picture of their face. The avatar is seen by anyone whether the profile is set to private or not. The avatar should be a picture at a distance or better yet of a family pet or something that would not be interesting to a sexual predator.
10. You should have access to your child's MySpace page at all times including the username and password. This could be invaluable if your child ever was missing. Some parents even create their own MySpace page and get added as a friend to their child's page to monitor what's going on. Believe it or not, this has become very popular for parents to create a page and if done right several kids have told me they thought it was kind of "cool" that some parents are willing to do that.
11. Have your child add a confirmed (preferably local to your area) law enforcement profile as a friend. That way they can ask questions or report concerns easily to a local police officer, as well as hopefully gaining safety information from the bulletins and blogs posted by that profile. Plus, predators are more reluctant to contact a child that has law enforcement personnel listed as a friend. For instance our High-Tech Crimes Task Force has a profile located at www.myspace.com/HighTechCops and we always welcome children from anywhere as a MySpace friend.

MySpace has received a large amount of media attention and there have been some children who were found on MySpace and later sexually abused by adults. Based on my experience with MySpace I have found they are very receptive and aggressive to any law enforcement or parent request. In fact they have many safety features in place that other social networking sites don't have.

If these steps are followed your child can have a positive and fun experience with social networking sites such as MySpace. Always look at your child's profile from the perspective of a criminal instead of a parent and error on the side of caution. For more information and suggestions please visit us on the web at www.HighTechCops.com.

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