

Social Networking

Concerning Sites Like MySpace

If you or people you know are thinking about getting into “social networking” – using the Internet to socialize and make new friends – you should carefully consider all the issues involved with this seemingly harmless activity. Social networking can be frustrating or hazardous if you are unaware of the dangers it can present.

Like the real world, the Internet contains good and bad things. Unlike the real world, the Internet allows anyone from anywhere to say and do things, exploiting Internet technology over great distances for free and often with a certain degree of anonymity or disguise: you may not know who they really are, where they really are from, or what they really have in mind when they interact with you in cyberspace.

Onguardonline.gov has this to say: “While social networking sites can increase a person's circle of friends, they also can increase exposure to people with less than friendly intentions.”

Here some things you might want to consider:

- Embarrassment:** Think before you type or post something online. Your words may come back to haunt you.
- Trust:** Trust develops as people get to know one another over time. True friends in the real world can trust each other at some point. Virtual friends may not be as trustworthy and dependable.
- Conduct:** You are accountable for your words and actions. The Internet does not give you the right to say or do whatever you want to whomever you wish. Treat others respectfully, as you'd like to be treated. Authorities can track you down and hold you responsible if you do something bad.
- Cyberbullies:** Onguardonline.gov defines “cyberbullying” as “using technology to harass, or bully, someone else” and recommends: “Avoid escalating the situation. Document the Activity. Report it to the appropriate authorities” including school authorities if necessary.
- Privacy/ID theft:** Do not be careless with personal information, even your e-mail address. “Identity theft” means someone with enough information could impersonate you and cause problems in your name.
- Predators:** People you interact have different motivations other than simply “being friendly.” Some prey on people's unawareness. Some stalk. Some have worse things in mind. Always consider people's possible motivations. Do not do or say things that could encourage strangers to attempt closer, possibly inappropriate relationships with you. Never agree to meet strangers.
- Scams:** If something seems too good to be true, it may be. Exercise healthy skepticism and critical thinking, where you carefully consider the information you receive.
- Spyware/viruses:** The popularity of social networking sites can make you a prime target for bad and potentially invasive and destructive programs such as spyware or viruses. Beware of file attachments and downloads, even if they appear to come from people you know (hint: look up “phishing”). Even if your computer has updated security software, your PC could still be at risk of a “zero hour” or “zero day” attack, when security programs do not yet recognize a new virus or threat.
- Peer Pressure:** As in the real world, peer pressure exists online. Fitting in, to be part of a group, to be “cool” and popular – these feelings could lead to disaster in cyberspace if you act on them without thinking things through. Some social network website frequenters claim to have hundreds of “friends” worldwide, but consider how many of them are really their friends. Real friends are supportive of you, understanding, and will not pressure you unless you are doing or considering something that they believe is wrong or dangerous for you.

For more information...

Consider talking things over with family members, your real world friends, co-workers, as well as school and local authorities whenever in doubt or whenever you feel uncomfortable with something or someone while at a social networking website. As it is often said and all too true, it is much better to be safe than sorry!

More information on social networking is featured in our Special Coverage Center (thrall.org/special) which has convenient links to websites on current issues and events. We also have a Critical Thinking course on the web (thrall.org/criticalthinking) and printable handouts (thrall.org/docs) including our handy *Web Checklist*.