

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO 'VIRTUAL' POPULARITY

by Tish Biggs, Ph.D.

When young people want to socialize today, they're as likely to go online as they are to head to the mall. Connecting virtually, they hang out at MySpace, Xanga, Facebook, and more than 200 other social-networking websites—and the number is growing daily.

Parents have heard much about the dangers. Crafting rules to effectively manage children's use of these websites is the modern parents' dilemma. Here are a few basics that parents can adopt.

SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION

»**Be sparingly honest.** Decide in your family how much information you are comfortable with your child sharing—online or offline. Name? Address or phone number? Age? School? Favorite bands? Photo? Talk with your child about what is acceptable to share with someone and what is not.

»**Protect your brand.** With the advent of digital and cell-phone cameras, every action and event in which your child participates is available for recording and distributing. Kids need to think of their online behavior as a reflection on themselves—as a “brand name” that needs to be protected from false or misleading advertisement. Discuss these topics with your child: “How do I perceive myself?” “How do I want others to perceive me?” “What situations would I never want anyone to see me in?”

»**The “Grandma rule.”** Young people should be aware that even though they create a website in the privacy of their own home, unless the site is locked as private, everyone can see it. So, if they wouldn't want their grandmother to read it, hear it, or see it, they shouldn't post it.

TRUSTING STRANGERS

»**Know your true friends.** Have a discussion with your child about the differences in relationships. When is someone a stranger, an acquaintance, or a friend? Since there is no method for verification online, one cannot trust a visual cue, such as a picture or text.

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Just because a social-networking site labels a request for contact as a “friend request” doesn't mean these requests are truly from friends. Help your child distinguish these differences so he or she can label relationships correctly.

»**Trust and tell.** Establish a pact with your child. If he or she decides to trust a friend in a virtual environment, he or she must tell someone about the relationship. That can be an adult or a peer, and may not necessarily be the parent. But someone needs to know and be able to monitor the situation. As for face-to-face encounters, the best rule is that meeting a stranger in person who he or she has met online is always risky.

SECURING YOUR HOME

»**Computer central.** Many parents assume that because their child is at home, all is well and the child is safe. But opening your computer to a virtual world is like leaving the front door to your house open so anyone can enter. Make sure the home computer is located in a common area, so that adults passing through can get a peek at what is on the screen.

»**Use security tools.** Install firewall soft-

ware on the home computer to protect both it and your personal information against intrusion. If you suspect your child is engaged in unsafe behavior online and you are unable to have a conversation with him or her, install keylogger software, which is designed to capture each keystroke being made, so you can check his or her activity after the fact.

PERMISSIONS

»**Prohibition.** Forbidding children to use the Internet or social-networking sites only makes the activity more attractive. Young people have access in many places that parents do not control—libraries, schools, friends' homes. In the long run, teaching children to make good choices about how to use these sites is a better strategy than trying to eliminate children's use of them.

»**Denial.** Some parents are very confident that their child already has the necessary skills to make good decisions using these websites. But do not assume that your child is immune from the influence of others. Remember, all students want to be accepted, respected, and liked.

Being a proactive parent means recognizing your children's needs and helping them achieve those needs through safe behaviors. As Shakespeare admonished, “Love all, trust a few, do wrong to no one.” ■■

Tish Biggs, Ph.D., is the director of educational advancement for Time Warner Cable.

