



## Why parents must mind MySpace

Posting too much information on social networking sites may be dangerous

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You may never have heard of MySpace.com, but it's a safe bet, your kids have.

It's a social networking sites — sort of a cyber combination of a yearbook, personal diary and social club. The biggest of them is MySpace.com. With more than 50 million members, its one of the fastest growing Web sites in the country.

**Shannon Sullivan, teenager:** Everyone has a MySpace and everyone wants a My Space.

It's free, easy to join, and easy to message its members. Kids chat about everything from school, to sports, to fundraisers for Katrina victims. It all seems like innocent fun, and it can be. But many parents and teens are unaware there are hidden dangers.

**Shannon Sullivan:** I honestly just thought it was my friends looking at it

Which is why Shannon disclosed so much on her space. She put her name, her address, and where she went to school— everything about how to find Shannon was on that site.

**Rob Stafford, Dateline correspondent:** Were you worried about doing that?**Shannon Sullivan:** I didn't think twice about it.

Shannon did think twice about something else: The rules on my space say you're supposed to be at least 14 years old.

**Stafford:** How old did you say you were?**Shannon Sullivan:** I think it was 18.**Stafford:** You think it was 18?**Sullivan:** I was 13 at the time.

Shannon's mother Margaret happens to run the computer system at a private grammar school. She has parental controls on her home computer, and several months ago, MySpace popped up on one of the reports Margaret gets on the Web sites Shannon has visited.

**Margaret Sullivan:** I was just very upset. Somebody looking for a kid could find a kid very easily.**Stafford:** Had you ever heard of it?**Margaret Sullivan:** No.

She was stunned by what Shannon revealed and found the sites of other kids far more revealing.

**Margaret Sullivan:** I found all kinds of pictures of kids in revealing positions, and pictures of kids scantily dressed.

It's a cyber secret teenagers keep from tech-challenged parents who are not as savvy as Margaret. It's a world where the kids next door can play any role they want. They may not realize everyone with Internet access, including sexual predators, may see the pictures and personal information they post.

When "Dateline" surfed MySpace, we found scenes of binge drinking, apparent drug use, teens posing in underwear, and other members simulating sex, and in some cases even having it. We also found less provocative pages like Shannon's was, but potentially even more dangerous. Teens listed not only their names, and addresses, but even cell phone numbers and after school schedules.

**Parry Aftab, Internet lawyer and safety expert:** [It's] one stop shopping for sexual predators, and they can shop by catalogue.

Internet lawyer Parry Aftab started the Web site [wiredsafety.org](http://wiredsafety.org), and [her safety tips appear on MySpace.com](#).

**Stafford:** Do parents have any idea what some kids are posting on these sites?**Aftab:** Parents are clueless. They're caught like deer in the headlights.

Aftab educates parents and kids about the dangers lurking on the Web.

**Aftab:** Pedophiles are using all of the social networking sites. And every other anonymous Internet technology to find kids. The social networking sites are where kids are.

Aftab says even kids who don't list their name and address can provide enough personal information— such as the kinds of bands and boys they love— for a pedophile to use to con their way into their lives.

**Aftab:** If someone knows you "like pina coladas and walks in the rain," it's very easy online to be exactly what it is you're looking for— to be your "soul mate."**Stafford:** Who might happen to be a 40 year old predator?**Aftab:** Absolutely. The teens just don't get it. To them, they're talking to a computer monitor. They're playing in an area where they don't recognize the consequences.

In the last month, authorities have charged at least three men with sexually assaulting teenagers they found through MySpace.com and just this week police found a missing 15-year-old girl who investigators say was sexually assaulted by a 26-year-old man she met through the site. MySpace members are now warning each other about the danger of sharing information online.

Aftab says parents need to find out what their kids are sharing.

**Aftab:** Say to your kids, "I'd like to see your profile page tomorrow." It's important that you give them a day to clean up their page. That will be the last time you give them warning.

Then Aftab says look at their site: Are the pictures provocative? Their profiles too detailed? Who are they talking to? And perhaps most important— have they kept their profiles private, protected by a password, to keep strangers out?

MySpace.com would not agree to an on-camera interview [but did tell "Dateline" via e-mail](#) that it prohibits posting personal information and has a team that searches for and removes both underage users and offensive material. MySpace said it does not pre-screen the content of its more than 50 million members, but encourages all of them to exercise caution.

Shannon Sullivan's safety lesson came from her mom who grounded her from the Internet for two weeks.

**Stafford:** And six months ago you had no idea this was a danger?**Shannon Sullivan:** Six months ago, I thought it was just another place you can to on the computer.**Stafford:** And you were 18 back then?

**Shannon Sullivan:** Yes. (laughs)

Her mother, Margaret, did something Aftab says too many parents are afraid to do: take control of their child's computer.

**Aftab:** They're afraid of their kids. They somehow think because technology is involved, they're no longer the parent. Get real. You're the parent. If you don't like it, unplug the computer. If they don't follow your rules, no Internet at all. If you're not the parent and if you're not going to step in, no Web site on earth is going to be able to help your child be safe.

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