

Teens at risk on social Web sites

Tuesday, February 21, 2006

NEW HAVEN, Connecticut (AP) -- On MySpace.com, teenagers can find kindred spirits who share their love of sports, their passion for photography or their crush on a Hollywood star. They can also find out where their online friends live, where they attend school, even what they look like.

And so can adults.

Parents, school administrators and police are increasingly worried that teens are finding trouble online at sites like MySpace, the leader among the social-networking sites that encourage users to build larger and larger circles of friends.

Police in Middletown, Connecticut, are investigating recent reports that as many as seven local girls were sexually assaulted by men in their 20s who contacted them through MySpace pretending to be teenagers. (Full story)

One girl allowed a man into her room while her parents were home, police said, underscoring just how in the dark parents often are about one of the most popular Web activities for teens today.

There are other reports like these scattered around the country, prompting some parents and schools to equate the likes of MySpace with the Internet's red-light district, even as many experts believe that the worries are greater than the actual dangers.

Joseph Dooley is among those who has heard it all before. A retired FBI agent who supervised the agency's first undercover Internet task force in New England, Dooley remembers when America Online chat rooms were the rage. Teens posted detailed profiles of themselves and chatted with any of AOL's subscribers.

Chat rooms soon gave way to services like MySpace, but Dooley said the rules have not changed and parents need to become more engaged.

"Let the kids know, on the Internet, you don't know who you're talking to," Dooley said. "Parents aren't the friends of their kids. Parents needs to know and observe what their kids are doing."

That can be daunting for working parents. Keeping tabs on the kids used to mean knowing where they went after school, not whom they talked to in their bedrooms.

So when they hear of a new fad among teens, their instinct is to worry.

And the horror stories are indeed terrifying.

Last month, for example, 14-year-old Judy Cajuste was found strangled and naked in a Newark, New Jersey, garbage bin. Police seized a computer from her bedroom after friends said she told them of a man in his 20s she met on MySpace. The death remains unsolved.

Beyond the threat of abduction, bullies who once made the rounds on playgrounds are using Web logs and home pages to spread rumors and lies faster than the schoolyard grapevine ever could.

MySpace profiles have been used to threaten classmates and in at least one case, to mock a school principal.

Many schools have responded by restricting Internet access from school computers. One private school in Newark, New Jersey, ordered students to remove all personal blogs from the Internet, even if accessed from home, to protect them from online predators.

Some parents, like Ululani Stauffacher of Eureka, California, forbid their children from using MySpace. Stauffacher said her 17-year-old daughter ran off for two days with a 19-year-old man she met online.

"I was going crazy," Stauffacher said. "I was just hearing things about MySpace and incidents of girls missing and some don't get returned to their families. All that I was thinking about was that my daughter was going to be another statistic."

The concerns are not limited to MySpace, but the News Corp. unit gets the attention because of its sheer size -- 54 million users, a quarter of them registered as teens.

MySpace forbids minors 13 and under from joining and provides special protections for those 14 and 15 -- only those on their friends' list can view their profiles. Nonetheless, kids lie when they sign up, and many of their profiles carry photos of themselves in suggestive poses, along with personal information against the site's recommendations.

"They're licking their lips and arching their back for the camera because they can, and they have no idea of the consequences," said Parry Aftab, an Internet safety expert.

But Aftab said most MySpace users are not getting themselves in trouble.

Experts say that banning children from using social-networking sites is akin to forbidding them from going to the mall or the movie theater for fear they will be abducted.

"I wish I could hover over my children 24-7, but the best I can do is teach them that there are ways to keep themselves safe," said Steve Jones, a communications professor who studies new media at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In a statement, MySpace said it has developed safety tips for parents and children and devotes scores of employees to monitoring the site around the clock. The site also has ways for users to report inappropriate behavior. The company says it removes inappropriate images and closes accounts that violate its rules.

Chris DeWolfe, MySpace's chief executive, encourages parents to talk to their kids about Internet safety, but Aftab said many parents ignore advice until it is too late.

Connecticut Chief State's Attorney Christopher Morano, who has strictly limited the information his 10- and 12-year-old children put on the Internet, said he was surprised to learn that they had been contacted by strangers they believed were pedophiles. His kids ignored it, Morano said, but parents need to closely monitor Internet activity.

"You wouldn't leave your kid on the side of the highway without supervision," Morano said. "You shouldn't put them on the Internet highway without the same type of supervision."