

# The Internet, Your Child, and You!

*An Advisory from the Blackstone-Millville Regional School District Technology Department, January 2006*

E-mail. Chat rooms. Blogging. Instant Messaging. These are all Internet-based activities that young people across America are involved with on a daily basis. It is probably safe to assume that the young people in Blackstone and Millville are as computer and Internet savvy as their counterparts in other areas. They are also subject to the same dangers that exist with all this Internet-related activity. We have all heard and read about Internet identity theft, on-line dating, on-line shopping and auctions, scams and frauds delivered via e-mail and websites, cyber-bullying, copyright infringement in downloading material and music, on-line gaming, on-line chat, etc. The inherent dangers in some of these activities are readily apparent, especially when it concerns our children.

The BMRSD Technology Department is publishing this newsletter in the hope that our parents and guardians will learn about some of these dangers, that they will learn about how to get involved in their child's on-line activities and that they will acquire a bank of resources on the topic. An on-line version of this newsletter is available at <http://www.bmrtd.net/technology/index.htm> and, until June 2006, in the scrolling news at [www.bmrtd.net](http://www.bmrtd.net).

## SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

**What is a blog?** On the Internet, a blog (short for weblog) is a personal journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or reflect the purpose of the Web site that hosts the blog. Postings sometimes include personal data, pictures, experiences, feelings and opinions. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry each day, and its informal style.

**What is MySpace.com?** MySpace.com (or MySpace) is a free social networking website that uses the Internet for online communication through an interactive network of photos, weblogs and user profiles. It includes an internal e-mail system, web forums and groups. MySpace is a very active site, with new members signing up daily and additions and new features being added regularly. The increasing popularity of the site and its ability to host mp3s has led to many musicians and bands registering, sometimes having their profile pages as their official website. Online diaries are part of the daily lives of many teenagers and college students. Friends use blogs to communicate with each other. (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/>)

**What is Chat?** - Real-time communication over the Internet. You type and send messages that appear almost instantly on the computer monitors of the other people who are participating in the chat.

**What is Instant Messaging (IM)?**- A service that allows people to send and get messages almost instantly. To send messages using Instant Messaging you need to download an Instant-Messaging program and know the Instant-Messaging address of another person who uses the same Instant-Messaging program.

## SOME TIPS FOR PARENTS:

Try to set up some simple rules for your child to follow while using the Internet:

\* **Talk with your Child About What They Can and Cannot Do Online**

\* **Be Reasonable and Set Reasonable Expectations.** Try to understand their needs, interests, and curiosity. Remember what it was like when you were their age.

\* **Be Open with Your Children and Encourage Them to Come to You if They Encounter a Problem Online**

If they tell you about someone or something they encountered, your first response should not be to blame them or take away their Internet privileges. Work with them to help avoid problems in the future, and remember – your response could determine whether they confide in you the next time they encounter a problem.

\* **Learn Everything You Can About the Internet:** Ask your teens to show you what's cool. Have them show you great places for teens and fill you in on areas that you might benefit from as well. Make "surfing the net" a family experience. Use it to plan a vacation, pick out a movie, or check out other family activities. Make this one area where you get to be the student and your child gets to be the teacher.

\* **Check Out Blocking, Filtering and Ratings Applications:** As you may know, there are now services that rate web sites for content as well as filtering programs and browsers that empower parents to block the types of sites they consider to be inappropriate. These programs work in different ways. Some block sites known to contain objectionable material. Some prevent users from entering certain types of information such as their name and address. Other programs keep your children away from chatrooms or restrict their ability to send or read E-mail. Generally these programs can be configured by the parent to only block the types of sites that the parent considers to be objectionable.

Whether or not it is appropriate to use one of these programs is a personal decision. You should also be careful to choose a program with criteria that reflects your family's values. If you do use such a program, you'll probably need to explain to your child why you feel it is necessary. Be sure to configure it so that it doesn't block sites that you want your teen to be able to visit.

It is important to realize that filtering programs cannot protect your child from all dangers in cyberspace. To begin with, no program can possibly block out every inappropriate site. What's more, it's possible, in some cases, for the programs to block sites that are appropriate. Filtering programs are not a substitute for good judgment or critical thinking. With or without filters, children and their parents need to be "net savvy" and communicate with each other.  
([http://www.safeteens.com/safeteens.htm#Guidelines\\_for\\_Parents\\_0](http://www.safeteens.com/safeteens.htm#Guidelines_for_Parents_0))

### **SOME THINGS TO DO IF/WHEN AN INCIDENT OCCURS:**

**When someone wants to meet your child offline....**As your children interact on the Internet, you need to be aware that they may be exposed to people who don't have their best interests in mind. If your children ever tell you that someone has asked them to meet offline, find out as much as you can about the situation. Save any communication to your computer; if there is illegal activity, a record of the conversation can be powerful evidence in court. Contact your local police department if you suspect your child is in immediate danger. Your child will not always be contacted to meet offline by someone dangerous. If you are comfortable with the idea of your child meeting in person with another child he or she first met online, arrange it by contacting that child's parents, and accompany your child to the meeting in a public place. ....Always encourage your children to talk to you about their online experiences.

**When your child doesn't know what to do. ....**You are the greatest tool at your child's disposal for staying safer online. When your children have questions or concerns about something that they find on the Internet, be open to listening and helping to find an answer. If you show them early on that you are a resource and support, they will be that much more likely to communicate with you when a real concern arises. If you don't have the answer to something, take that as an opportunity to find a solution together.

(Check out more situational scenarios at the Parent Page of NetSmartz, <http://netsmartz.org>)

### **SOME RESOURCES FOR YOU:**

**Massachusetts Attorney General's Office.** Two reports: "Internet Safety: Advice From Kids Who Have Faced Danger Online" and "The Internet, Your Child and You: What Every Parent Should Know"

<http://www.ago.state.ma.us/sp.cfm?pageid=988>

**Netsmartz.** The NetSmartz Workshop is an interactive, educational safety resource that teaches kids and teens how to stay safer on the Internet. NetSmartz combines the newest technologies available and the most current information to create high-impact educational activities that are well received by even the most tech-savvy kids. Parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement also have access to additional resources for learning and teaching about the dangers children may face online. NetSmartz was created by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. *Mass. Department of Education recommended.* <http://netsmartz.org/>

**SafeKids.com:** Your family's guide to making the Internet and Technology fun, safe and productive. Topics include Child Safety on the Information Highway, Kids Rules for Online Safety, Guidelines for Parents, What are the Risks?, Privacy Issues, Family Contract for Online Safety.

<http://www.safekids.com/>

**Blog Safety:** ....where teens, parents, teachers and adult bloggers can learn about the benefits of safe blogging.

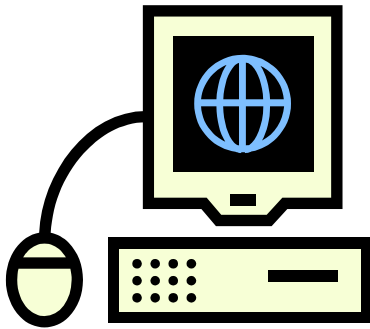
<http://www.blogsafety.com/>

**WiredSafety.org:** Provides help, information and education to Internet and mobile device users of all ages, including sections on spyware, adware, chat, e-mail and on-line gaming. <http://wiredsafety.org/>

**Cyber-bullying.** Mobilizing educators, parents, students, and others to combat online social cruelty. <http://cyberbully.org/>

**GetNetWise.org:** Information about all kinds of on-line risks including for Internet safety, spam, security, privacy, adware and spyware tips, and risks from hackers and viruses, <http://www.getnetwise.org/>

**Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA)** <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.html>



### **“What Parents Need to Know About Blogging”**

by **Anne Collier**

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Blogs are new to a lot of parents, but they're nothing new to kids. Fifty-two percent of all blogs belong to 13-to-19-year-olds, according to a recent study at Georgetown University, the number of blogs has been put at anywhere between 10 million and 32 million, and a new blog is created about every 5.8 seconds. That's why we'll keep coming back to this moving target of a subject, and we recommend that you check the News often, because we report on teen blogs a lot. But here are some basics for parents:

Blogging's pretty new, but so far there are basically three kinds of blogs: professionals' blogs (where journalists, techies, researchers, etc. talk about what they're working on), amateur blogs about interests and hobbies (film, music, parenting, sports, pets, etc.), and social blogs. Kids' blogs certainly involve their interests too, but usually in the context of their social scene - a lot like instant messaging. A blog is just another "place" for kids to hang out with their friends.

Blogging can take place on one of the services popular among teens like MySpace.com and Xanga.com, so - as with instant messaging - teenagers tend to use the service their friends use. Which one they use is not really negotiable (if your friends aren't there, there's no point in being there, the thought goes).

Because it's so social, blogging usually isn't meant to be private like a diary, even though many teens publish very personal information in their blogs. They post (or type into the blog) their thoughts and feelings - about themselves, friends, music, parties, what's going on at school, etc. - and friends post their replies. Like instant-messaging, blogs also include a personal profile - a place where friends and strangers can click to find out the blogger's description of herself, her favorite tunes, celebrities, Web sites, etc. Many blogs expect you to post a picture of yourself to go with the profile. Some allow you to post other pictures and audio clips and links to music playlists. Some people just use blogs to share photos. The pictures part has been a shock to some parents who've read teen blogs, but we'll come back to that.

**Young bloggers' privacy.....**So far, privacy clearly has not been an issue for teen bloggers themselves - except, of course, when their parents read their blogs. A young blogger could be posting the most intimate details of his life for anyone in the world to find in a search engine, but when a parent sees the post, very often a teen's privacy-invasion flag goes up. Complete strangers are less of an issue. This will probably change, as public (and parent) awareness grows and adults get more engaged in kids' blogging experiences.

Until then, it would be good for parents and kids to have a conversation about basic privacy protection while blogging ([click here](#) to read how one father and 12-year-old blogger worked through the issues). All the basic online-safety rules should apply in the blogging space as much as with any other online activity (see the rules at [SafeTeens.com](http://www.safeteens.com) and [SafeKids.com](http://www.safekids.com)).

**Basic blogging smarts.....**It's always a good idea to ask your child if s/he has a blog. If the answer is no, search for his or her full name in a Web search engine just to be sure (parents should have no qualms about ensuring that a child isn't putting any information online that identifies him or her personally - this is basic child protection). If the answer is yes, good for your child for being up front about it! Only two basic questions need to follow:

1. *You're not publishing any personally identifiable information in your blog, right?* (Examples: full name, school name, street address, phone no., etc.) The most important policy by far is never to use your full name online.
2. *Are there privacy protections at your blogging service, and do you use them?* The safest policy is: Keep it among friends - don't let strangers read your posts, comment/reply to them, or add themselves to your group or Friends list. Also, don't make your email address or IM screenname public unless it's a "throw-away" account you can delete if someone starts harassing you.

That second question is really the start of a discussion, since children and parents usually have different definitions of privacy and its importance. Also, different blogging services have different levels and types of privacy protection - keep reading.

**Beware the three "P's".....**That would be **Posts** (blog entries), **Profiles** (bloggers' and instant messagers' descriptions of themselves), and **Pictures**. These are all wonderful means of self-expression and getting to know people, but they're also the areas where young bloggers' privacy, and possibly safety, is most vulnerable. We all know kids are risk-takers and often use the anonymous online environment to experiment with identity. So most online kids know that what you see isn't always what you get online (people fudge their ages and sometimes post pictures of "themselves" that aren't recent or even real), but kids don't always think about what other people can do with the information they post in blogs, whether friends, former friends, or strangers. If a friend somehow switches loyalties or gets mean, someone posting very personal information or pictures can really get hurt. Help your kids think about the implications of forgoing privacy and revealing their innermost thoughts.

**Blogging sites' privacy options (the 4th "P").....**Though your child may not be using one of the more protective services (and, to her/him, switching may be "social death"), most do have some pretty good privacy features. In most cases, the protections are obvious right when you sign up (you might start a test blog to see what it's all about). Your child can also show you how s/he configured them, which might be a good thing to run through together. Here are some examples of privacy options in most blogging services:

- At sign up (or reconfiguring account set-up), opting for friends-only or me-only (like a diary) instead of public blogging
- When posting, making each entry private or friends-only
- Not allowing his/her blog to be in the service's searchable directory
- Allowing only friends to post replies in his blog
- Not allowing people they don't know to add them to their Friends or Buddy list.

Depending on maturity level, if your child is a tween or young teen, it might be a good idea to go through the blogging service's privacy options right alongside him or her. Then go to the blog together and click around. Make sure the profile doesn't reveal anything someone with bad intentions could use to contact him or her; check out his or her photos (or have her sub in a favorite pop artist, pet, flower, or animation); click to friends' blogs; and talk, as you go, about how much your child really feels comfortable about revealing to friends who can be fickle. Again depending on trust and maturity levels, it's also a good idea for parents to know their child's username and password. Kids won't like it, but they need to know that it's not to embarrass, but to protect, them.

**A few specifics on the services.....**This is by no means a comprehensive list, but the blogging services teens tend to prefer are sites like MySpace.com, Xanga.com, LiveJournal.com, and Blurty.com. All provide a measure of privacy, but seldom seem to act upon abuse reports - users are pretty much on their own. Then there are the big-company services like MSN Spaces, Yahoo 360, Google's Blogger.com, and AOL's RED Blogs for teens (the most protective, but only for AOL members). MSN Spaces and Yahoo 360 both provide at least two levels of privacy, Blogger is all-public-all-the-time (except you can choose not to have your blog listed on its home page or available to search engines). MySpace, which says it's only for bloggers 14+ (and says it'll delete profiles of under-14s if it finds out) makes its privacy options a little harder to find (go to "Account Settings," then "Privacy Settings"), and there are no privacy settings for individual entries (that can be clicked on before posting). For example, some services allow the blogger to make sure only friends read a particular post, or to go back later and change its privacy level. MySpace may eventually become more overt about user privacy, because its parent company, InterMix, has been acquired by large media company News Corp., which makes it about as "mainstream" as Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo.