

Protect Kids from Dangers of MySpace

By Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh

These days, it seems as though every teenager has a MySpace page. It is estimated that more than 200 million people are part of the MySpace network. It's one of the most visited Web sites on the Internet. That might be good for MySpace but it can present a host of problems for young people and their parents.



One Ohio sex offender, Michael Kairis, began chatting with a woman on MySpace. When she agreed to meet him, he raped her six-year-old daughter in her home. Another Ohio sex offender, Shad Welch, also had a MySpace page. On his profile, he stated his mood was "horny."

Several months ago, an Akron woman was attacked by a man she communicated with on MySpace. That man was convicted of rape, attempted murder, kidnapping, and felonious assault, among other charges. He was sentenced to 63 years in prison.

Simply put, we do not know who is behind any MySpace profile.

As of November 2007, there were 627,217 registered sex offenders in the United States. New Jersey became the third state to pass legislation to ban sex offenders from the Internet. That was after officials found hundreds of the state's 11,566 registered sex offenders on MySpace and other networking sites.

More than 16,000 sex offenders live in Ohio. And while they are required to register with local law enforcement authorities, their Internet activities largely go unmonitored. Last year, after MySpace turned over subpoenaed records, Ohio's Attorney General's Office identified 470 registered sex offenders who had profiles.

As of last count, MySpace has deleted about 30,000 profiles belonging to registered sex offenders. One has to wonder just

how many profiles belong to registered sex offenders who are better at covering their tracks; not to mention how many sex offenders-in-training that we don't know about who are using MySpace, preying on women and children.

I strongly urge parents to consider not allowing their children to use networking sites like MySpace. If you choose to allow your child to use MySpace, don't be fooled into thinking that privacy settings are keeping them safe. MySpace doesn't verify the age of users as it depends on users to report their age truthfully. If a 40-year-old sexual predator says he is 15, no one checks his ID to confirm that. In fact, of the 10 registered sex offenders that North Dakota's Attorney General identified on MySpace, not a single one gave his true age.

Users post a lot of information about themselves on MySpace – pictures, intimate details about their lives, and comments that sound more like private telephone banter. Take a look at your child's MySpace profile, make sure their MySpace friends are people they actually know, and, most important, explain the risks of Internet networking sites.

More importantly, consider Internet monitoring software. My

office purchased a software program called "Computer Cop." We are currently out of our supply of the Computer Cop discs, but this type of software can also be purchased at computer stores for a relatively nominal amount. Computer Cop, or similar software, is a simple disk that, once inserted in your computer, will provide an account of the Web sites and images that have been viewed. If you are concerned about chat rooms or instant messaging, such as AIM, Computer Cop allows you to monitor keystrokes, which will log conversations in a detailed report. Computer Cop will not only give you peace of mind when your child is online, it will help you ensure your child's safety. ◀◀

