Social Networking Site Safety
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The earliest concept of what is now referred to as an Internet social networking site got its start in 1988 when America Online® created friends profiles that were easily searchable by interest topics. Between 2002 and 2004 several other social networking sites began appearing and according to USA Today, the most popular one now boasts more than 70 million members.

Social networking sites—which may loosely be explained as a cyber combination of a school yearbook, personal diary, social club, or gathering place—are extremely popular with kids, teens, and even adults. The sites are free, easy to join, and messaging between members is nearly effortless. Each user develops a home page or profile page that has a self-composed, descriptive profile. Some of these pages contain personal photos and most contain message boards. In some situations, instead of using email or instant messaging, some kids will keep in touch with friends by simply posting bulletins for one another. The home page or profile page can be used by friends to send private messages or just to post a public comment. Friends can also view a teen's photo album or they can read a web journal that is called a blog.
Unfortunately, child molesters will exploit social networking sites because they often provide another means by which to gain access to young people. Law enforcement has frequently found that the personal information that kids post on their pages can make them vulnerable to predators. Even teens who don't list their names and addresses can provide enough personal information—such as the names of their schools or the names of their friends—for a molester to use in order to con their way into their lives.

On July 24, 2007, MSNBC reported that one such networking site admitted that it had identified more than 29,000 registered sex offenders in the United States who had created accounts and were actually using their real names on their profile page. In one reported case, a registered sex offender had even posted his police mug shot on his social networking profile page because he had no one to take his photograph. The identification of the registered sex offenders by the site followed extensive formal legal requests by several state attorneys general who demanded that the website provide data on how many registered sex offenders were using the service, along with information about where they live.

Unfortunately, the 29,000 registered sex offenders who were reported to the state attorneys general are probably only a small fraction of the number of predators using social networking sites because there are likely many more offenders who were deceptive enough to use aliases rather than real names. Additionally, the information that was provided to the state attorneys general in this case is from a single social networking site only—and there are several other popular sites that exist in on the Internet today.

So What is a Caring Adult To Do?

Establish family Internet rules—As soon as your children begin to use the Internet on their own, it is a good idea to come up with a list of rules that everyone in the family can all agree upon. These rules should also include whether your children can use or visit social networking sites and the rules for using them. Establish immediately that you will monitor the site and its contents. Proactive parenting techniques regarding social networking sites

are needed today not only to protect your child or teen against child molesters but other social networking dangers such as the hoax that was recently reported in Missouri where a depressed 13 year old girl hanged herself after an ex-friend's mother pretended to be an online boyfriend who was initially caring and then turned very mean.

Educate yourself about the social networking site—Once you have identified the social networking site that is most popular in your area, school, or parish you must evaluate the site that your child plans to use and carefully read the privacy policy, code of conduct and the rules. You should also find out if the site monitors the content that people post on their pages. The recommended age for signing up for most social networking sites is usually 13 and over, although many underage children still can find a way to join by simply claiming that they are older. If children are under the recommended age for these sites, do not let them use the sites. Most importantly, if you have allowed a child or teen to join and create a profile, you should periodically review the child's page and their friends' pages for content.

Restrict the posting of personal information—As a child or teen creates the profile page, verify that he or she does not use a full name. Only allow the use of a non-identifying nickname. Also, do not allow children to post the full names of their friends on their profile page. In addition to prohibiting posting identifiable information in a child's profile such as home address, cell phone number, and date of birth. It is important to be aware that some social networking sites allow members to join public groups that are intended to include everyone who goes to a certain school, or claims that they attend the school. Be careful when your children reveal this and other information that could be used to identify them, such as the name of the town they live in, especially if it is a small one.

Be cautious about details in photographs—Explain to young people that photographs can reveal a lot of personal or private information. Encourage them not to post photographs of themselves or their friends with clearly identifiable details such as street signs, license plates on cars, the home address numbers, or the name of their school on their sweatshirts.

Warn your children about expressing emotions to strangers—As a caring adult, you've probably already discouraged young people from communicating with strangers online. However, young people also use social networking sites to write journals and poems that often express strong emotions. Explain to children that these words can be read by anyone with access to the Internet, even if they have been marked private, and that predators often search out emotionally vulnerable young people.

Insist that your children never physically meet anyone in person that they've communicated with only online—Children should be encouraged to electronically communicate only with friends or people they've actually previously met in person. Young people are in real danger if they actually meet "Internet friends" who are in fact strangers that they've only communicated with online.

Conclusion
Social networking sites are gaining in popularity every day. In some schools, social recognition or being known as one of the "popular kids" is now based upon how many "friends" you have listed on your profile or home page. It is therefore essential that caring adults not only understand how these sites work, but also how to remain actively involved in monitoring how young people are using the sites.