

The online kids quiz

For kids, cyberspace is like both sides of Alice's mirror.

On one hand, it can be a safe, positive experience where kids can grow and learn. On the other hand, it can be a very attractive wonderland that hides beneath the surface a wide variety of dangers lurking for the uninformed and unguided. Research shows that without supervision, it can be more the latter.

According to The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmo-Girl.com (in the sex and tech survey which surveyed 1,280 teens and young adults), a significant number of teens (20 percent aged 13 – 19) have electronically sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves. And although the research showed most teens and young adults are sending sexually suggestive content to boyfriends/girlfriends, other teens (15 percent) say they are sending such material to those they only know online and not in real life.

Combine this state of culture with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and Cox Communications study, which found 71 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 reporting having received messages online from someone they do not know, with 40 percent responding and only 18 percent telling an adult, and we have a great concern for our children's welfare online.

As a way of determining which way your child may be leaning, Mary Kay Hoal – President and Founder of Yoursphere.com, the only safety-first social networking site that only allows kids to become members – has assembled a quiz for parents to separate the fact from the fiction about kids online.

Q: Most social networking Web sites and forums verify identities and screen members before accepting them.

A: FALSE – In fact, most social networking sites do not screen new members at all. The only thing you need to have to become a member of

Facebook or MySpace is a valid email address. Beyond that, anything goes.

Q: Having a profile on a social networking site set to "Private" safeguards a person from anyone intending them harm.

A: FALSE – Members with profiles set to private can still get friend requests and are two clicks away from pornographers, trolls, or others intending harm.

Q: The best way to keep your kids safe and happy is to simply keep them off social networking sites altogether.

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A: FALSE – Kids can benefit greatly in life by participating in online social networks. Research shows youth are picking up basic social and technical skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society. Kids can add new media skills to their repertoire, and are able to engage in self-directed learning and enjoy friendship-driven and interest-driven online activities. This helps provide a more well-rounded development both in terms of education and social skills. Parents should use filters and firewalls as a foundation for keeping kids off of the wrong sites, and keep the computer in a public room at home to encourage acceptable behavior. First and foremost, parents should talk to their kids and remind them of how to behave safely on the Internet, just as parents would advise them in how to stay safe when they are out with their friends on a Saturday night. If you wouldn't say it to someone without a computer involved, then don't say it with one.

Q: It's really the "fringe kids" that are in danger on social networking sites.

A: FALSE – By the time kids are teens, they no longer have the aversion to talking to strangers that they



had as a small child. The fact that the communication takes place online, and is not in person, provides them a false sense of security. They don't feel they would ever be convinced to meet a potentially dangerous online friend offline. However, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and Cox Communications, 30 percent of teens have considered meeting someone that they have only talked to online and 14 percent have actually had such an encounter. So, it's not just the fringe kids – it may very well be your kids who are in danger without the right guidance and safeguards.

“Just because the Internet CAN be a scary and concerning place for our children, it doesn't mean that is HAS to be one,” said Hoal, who created Yoursphere after struggling with how to regulate her own daughter's online activities. “With communication, education and very simple, non-invasive monitoring techniques, every child can have a safe and rewarding online life and every parent can sleep a little better at night.”