



Concerned Mom Creates New Social Networking Site for Kids That Puts Safety, Security First

BY DYLAN SKRILOFF

Social networking is changing the way people communicate but its also posing a challenge to the parents of teenagers. In addition to the fact that many in the older generations would contend social media is giving people too much of an opportunity to gloat on in self-obsession, there is the cold hard fact that recent statistics show over 90,000 registered sex offenders are on MySpace and approximately 60,000 on Facebook. A recent study indicated that one in every five teenagers have been sexually solicited online.

Enter California mom Mary Kay Hoal. In 2006 she wanted to shield her then 12-year-old daughter from Myspace because she felt it subjected her both to mental and actual hazards. No matter how she tried she could not keep her daughter off of MySpace so she really went and took things into her own hands, creating "Yoursphere" (www.yoursphere.com) as an teen alternative to other social media sites.

Yoursphere is an enhanced, safety-first social networking site, which costs \$40 a year to be a member of. The site is for people 18 and under, no adults allowed, and is monitored to keep creeps out. While the site sounds very parental, Hoal said it's also been kid-tested, designed and approved so that it also "rocks" and is "not just some site made by a dorky mom," in her own words.

Yoursphere exceeds the Federal Trade Commission safety standards. The site's Chief Technology officer worked at the California Department of Justice tracking anonymous online sex offenders, as well as the Megan's Law database. Moreover, it requires verified parental consent for a minor to join.

"We're providing an alternative. We put the safety of kids and teens first - number 1. Based on that overall mission - we limit participation to no one over 18," Hoal said. "We allow kids and teens to create their own webpages. What we allow kids to do is to decorate it any way they want and make it about anything they want. That includes videos and music. They can use their sphere to post all their school information, even homework assignments. It's a kids and teens only zone, but there are pages for school teachers and coaches as well. They can have a profile page [like on other sites] but then they can connect with other kids based on their mutual interests."

Yoursphere gives back 40% of their fees to scholarship programs and programs in participating school districts. To become a member users must provide first name, last name, date of birth, address, last 4 digits of their social security number. "They are asked to provide less information than when they sign for a credit card," Hoal said. Yoursphere than pays to take the verification

and run across a database of sex offenders.

Hoal rested on the expertise of teen minds to make the site great. "We have a group of teens that are advisors and contributing writers because I knew once inside it would have to be a place that kids love," she said. Yoursphere also has a rewards program which allows members to win prizes from movie tickets on up to iPhones and gaming systems. She noted Yoursphere was sponsoring a young writer's contest at this moment.

She said young people were warm to the fact the site was all teen and kids. "What kids have said is they don't want to be bothered by creepy adults. All kids get in trouble, but the internet makes it that much easier. They didn't like the fact that some adults, typically male, would ask them to send naked photos, inappropriate photos. And creepy stuff aside, kids don't want their mom, dad, or teacher writing on their wall and friending them," she said.

Hoal said the term "yoursphere" was not a take off of "MySpace" but came from a sketch she had drawn of her daughter with a circle around her as she was thinking of how she could protect her from negative aspects of the internet and life in general. Of particular concern is the "sexualization" of the youth. She said she understands that sexuality obviously plays a role in all people's lives, but she believed





today's youth were being objectified before they had a chance to really understand.

"They are being sexually exploited ... that's only one dimension of who we are. Our kids need to be part of a community that focuses on their talents and interests, not on the sexualization of them. They've been participating in communities where that's been going on. Unless you set an example, no wonder. The problem with social networking sites is there is not enough purposeful activity."

She noted, "if there wasn't a computer involved, [a lot] of the stuff that's happened would be illegal. I get it that kids get in trouble but I get it if you give them good things to do, they do great things. Let's create a cultural shift and let's focus on the positive interests of kids."

3 tips from Hoal to parents about internet safety

- ▶ Be involved in your kids online activities just as you are in the rest of their lives. You need to be involved in the technology aspect of their life.
- ▶ Learn the technology, that doesn't mean being an expert – daughter taught me how to text. I went in and looked at social online communities. Have them teach you, have them show you.
- ▶ Communication and education about Internet safety is absolutely critical. What they post can have severe consequences they never intended to have. Teach them to be private with information.