

## Online safety net for pre-teens

By By JO HAMM

Originally published 12:00 a.m., June 26, 2009

Updated 08:54 a.m., June 26, 2009

You worry about them. Constantly. Preteen children and their requests for more freedom have their parents on edge, especially in the online world, where anonymity is king and evils can lurk.

Still, kids beg for a MySpace and Facebook page, because "everybody's got one."

"Kids are going to be online in some form or another — whether it's their laptop or phone. ... You can't keep them from the technology," said Bill Stein, information systems manager for the Metropolitan School District of Mount Vernon, Ind. "It's there, it's a part of their lives. If they're awake, they're connected. And they don't want to hear 'no, no, no' all the time, so it's all about guidance and smart usage."

Is there a safe alternative? When is a good time to introduce your children to social networking so you can be at peace with it yourself?

While there is no specific "green-light" age for preteens to begin social networking, there are a few good introductory social networking sites and some common-sense guidelines to practice when they're online for any reason.

Yoursphere.com provides the fun and independence kids crave while offering a safety net for parents. It works like MySpace, but has parent verification and a predator database check, which makes it different from other social networking sites.

Parents fill out a sign-up page with information such as e-mail, name, birth date and credit card information (there is a small monthly fee of about \$3.35 — a small price for peace of mind, and the first month is free). Yoursphere.com confirms the identity right then — no one is allowed in until they know who you are, which prevents "creepers" from randomly creating false profiles and preying on children. All names are checked against sexual offender registries.

And activity on the site is monitored by a team of law enforcement and FBI officials. Terms of use for the site allow hosts to turn over all information for prosecution. Parents can set up a dashboard of their own to view what their kids have done and can receive a parents' newsletter.

So with that much safety built in, can the site be enticing for kids?

It's designed for people 9 to 18 years old and looks and works like MySpace. Kids can "relax and be themselves," according to the site. You can design your own page, meet other kids, post pictures and music, send and receive messages, maintain blogs, compete in contests for prizes and share interests in groups called "spheres." Credits for properly using the site can be spent on rewards.

The site was created by Mary Kay Hoal, a mother of five and former media professional who was concerned about online safety for her daughter when she wanted to join MySpace. In an April 15 interview on the morning talk show "Daytime," Hoal said she pretended she was a teen on more than 10 social sites and was never asked to verify her identity. She had "kids" asking her to post pictures of her best body parts and within two clicks she could be on a pornography site.

Hoal said Yoursphere.com gets positive feedback every time its creators talk to parents, teachers and principals about what they do.

Her site offers something no other site does: a fun place for kids and teens where they can be themselves and where their safety is a priority.

Hoal added that it does much more than the average online community site; it is the sole youth-only site that has been approved by the Privacy Vaults Online Safe Harbor (PRIVO) of the Federal Trade Commission.

Look for the PRIVO seal of approval on any youth-based social site. It's an independent third-party provider of youth registration and parental permission management tools.

Companies must comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which promotes safe and responsible online interaction between Web sites and children under the age of 13.

Plenty of Web sites offer additional information about wise computer usage for minors: [www.enough.org/](http://www.enough.org/) gives specific age group guidelines, while [microsoft.com/protect/family/activities/](http://microsoft.com/protect/family/activities/) offers sensible advice for safe teen online activity.



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