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## When private becomes public

**By Stephanie Dunnewind**  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Prowling Internet pedophiles are just one concern experts raise about online social-networking sites such as [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com), which attract hundreds of local teens.

Here are some dangers:

### **Pedophiles**

The sheer amount of information in profiles is unprecedented, said Kim Komando, who hosts a syndicated radio show on technology that airs locally on KTTH-AM (770). When she warned against the "most dangerous" sites for kids, [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) topped the list.

"Before, bad guys had to do some work," she said. "Now, all that information is right there for the taking."

Reading local teens' MySpace profiles, The Times found one student who posted her phone number online for a friend. In a couple hours, The Times trolled about 20 profiles and tracked down three home phone numbers for local teens under 16.

Eight out of 10 online teens agree their peers aren't careful enough when sharing personal information on the Internet, according to a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey released earlier this year.

#### **Tips for parents**

The prime rule of Internet safety — don't reveal personal information — is difficult to follow when the whole purpose of a MySpace profile is to, well, reveal your personality.

"How do you establish online friends by talking about the weather?" asks Nancy Willard, executive director of the Eugene, Ore.-based Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.

She advises parents to help teens distinguish between three types of personal information:

Contact information. This includes

Kids with friends, a strong relationship with parents and good grades will probably get propositioned online — and just ignore it, delete it or block that user from contacting them, said Nancy Willard, executive director of the Eugene, Ore.-based Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.

"But kids who don't have positive real-world relationships will use online social communities to find those kinds of relationships," Willard said. "They're more vulnerable to the dangers present there."

This is especially true for teens who post sexy profiles. "They may hook up with a teen their own age," Willard said. "But there's also ample evidence these are hunting grounds for older men."

### **Bullying/harassment**

As more students join, there's an increased possibility of cyberbullying

**Contact information** This includes full name, address, school and phone number, which allow contact in the real world. "That's the kind of information that should never be posted." MySpace also warns against less obvious details such as names of school teams or nearby malls or photos that inadvertently show a house address or car license plate.

**Sensitive information** "That's the stuff that's close to the heart, that you wouldn't want to see in the local newspaper or have your mother read." It's also inadvisable to disclose in a profile since the information may be used against them.

**Personal interests** These are where teens should find their connections: favorite bands, sports, TV shows. "Parents need to show teens how to make friends online without putting themselves at risk."

If necessary, parents can monitor children online or set up parental-control programs to block access to social-networking sites.

*Stephanie Dunnewind, Seattle Times reporter*

with threats, name-calling and rumor-spreading, said Courtney Macavinta, author of the new "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Your Line Is Crossed." "Offline issues find their way online."

Reading local teens' pages, The Times found several examples of teens using foul names or homophobic "jokes" to demean peers.

"I really doubt that half these people would act like this to someone's face," Macavinta said. The Internet's seeming anonymity "brings people who aren't card-carrying bullies into some bullying behavior."

Macavinta recommends students report harassment to the Internet site since it probably violates the terms of service. If that doesn't stop it, she suggests informing the school or confronting the aggressor with a "let's cool it" approach.

Teachers also can get insulted; one school group discussed dangerous behavior toward a teacher.

### **Revealing intimate details**

If parents read blogs or profiles, most teens respond by accusing them of privacy invasion, Willard said. "They just don't get that it isn't private," she said. "They don't seem to understand the permanent, easily transferable, public nature of what they're posting."

Because online communities are centered on socializing, teens are lulled into a false sense of being only among friends. This can lead teens to share secrets they later regret, as what they post gets forwarded or passed around school.

"In 15 years, somebody is going to run for public office and their profile will get pulled up and used against them," Komando said. "All this information is being archived."

### **Marketing/advertising**

"[MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) has created a connected community where users put their lives online," noted a July release announcing Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation's purchase of MySpace for \$580 million. "As a result, [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) is a favorite with online advertisers."

And that's what the site ultimately comes down to, critics say: profit.

"One way MySpace gets money is through market research," Willard explained. "Teens' postings are critically analyzed for marketing. The site tries to get kids to reveal as much as they can for the purpose of manipulating them into buying things."