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### Social Networking: Our Children's Safety and Privacy

Social media has some positive benefits such as helping people to become more socially active and keeping people connected with one another. However, websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Bebo and Twitter can pose safety and privacy concerns. Social media users are more likely to fall for scams by clicking on unsafe links which can result in the revealing of private information. Nevertheless, many users assume that their private information is safe but even with virus, malware, and identity protection, that's just simply not the case. For instance, Facebook encourages the sharing of personal information such as: full name, birth date, address, telephone number, affiliations, relationship status, hobbies and photographs which can rapidly transfer between users. Who is looking at that information? And how will it be used? It is true that these websites have privacy settings and parents can limit a child's online interactions with parental controls but these features do not guarantee safety or privacy.

This is a cause for concern particularly when it comes to our children. For children, social media is like walking around in a large crowd of strangers alone; there are very high risks and dangers involved. Now days, parents prefer their children to stay indoors and away from outside danger but actually our indoor children are not as safe as we think. Since children are engaged with online activities more than ever, elementary schools should initiate a mandatory annual workshop that focuses primarily on children's online safety and privacy.

Social networking is designed for people to remain updated with their family and friends as well as sharing recipes, photos, videos, and ideas. However, it can quickly become an open

door for sexual predators. Pedophiles use a method known as online grooming to contact young children. For example, a young child may be playing an online game such as Farmville when suddenly an individual gains their attention to ultimately pave the way of a false relationship based on lies.

This has become an online issue ever since social media and chat rooms were created. If parents and children are unaware of the potential danger, they wouldn't know how to identify, and report suspicious or inappropriate behavior. It is not easy for children to distinguish authentic relationships when deceitful tactics are used such as pretending to share common interest, experiences, and backgrounds. In fact, it is even challenging for adults to distinguish when an individual is someone else in disguised. School officials and parents should collaborate in the effort to ensure the safety and privacy of children because it is important for them to know the risks, as well as the realities relating to safety and privacy online. Every day it becomes more apparent that social networking websites cannot fully weed out potential danger, even with the latest technology.

There are thousands of people aware of the dangers yet continue to take the risk of exposing private information to the unknown; this is where the controversy begins. Despite what my closest friends thought, I decided to interview them in a three way conversation over the phone. The moment that I asked for their opinion, it became clear that there were various points of views on the topic. I asked, "Is social media websites such as Facebook safe?" One of my friends replied, "Who cares, out of all the users, what are the chances of my profile being compromised?" My other friend stated, "Do yourself a favor and delete your Facebook profile if safety and privacy is an issue for you because it will never change." Then I asked, "Should schools educate families about online safety and privacy?" To my astonishment, both of my

friends had the same response, which was, “No, parents should take responsibility for their children’s online actions.” But my point is that not all parents and guardians are aware of the danger lurking behind the LCD screen or how serious the issue is. As noted above, if parents and children are unaware of the potential danger involved, they would have no idea on how to identify, and report suspicious or inappropriate behavior.

Many people believe that Facebook and other social sites are completely safe as long as guidelines are followed. Listed below is a guideline:

- Set profile to private
- Change your password often
- Never state your physical location
- Never fact that you are home alone
- Never tag your children’s pictures with their names
- Never post information regarding an upcoming vacation or trip

Given these points, there are two good words to describe how some parents feel with each click and key stroke as their children access social networking websites— hesitant and suspicious. Clive Thomas, author of “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy” states, “When cyberspace came along in the early 90s, it was celebrated as a place where you could reinvent your identity—become someone new.” This is a general example of how cyberspace has evolved from a place where identity was shaped with pleasing results to a place of uncertainty—loss of identity as opposed to reinvented identity.

With this in mind, it is evident that social media is not a safe haven for children or adults what so ever. To further explain, kids all over the world are downloading and interacting with online animated characters. For example, Talking Angela is an app that may provide parents

with some valid reasons for concern. Emma White, author of the online article, “Talking Angela app: the pedophile app,” states, that her daughter stayed home from school one day and decided to play with the Talking Angela app on her iPod. Her mother was near her when the talking app called the girl by name and asked, “Where is your brother?” The talking app began to ask perverted questions to the little girl. The mother informed the police department and opened a case regarding the incident.

David Disalvo, author of “Are social networks messing with your head,” mentions a paper published in 2007 by researchers Danah Boyd of Microsoft research New England in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Nicole B. Ellison of Michigan State University. Other websites are aimed at young children such as Disney’s Club Penguin, where kids interact as animated characters in a vibrant online world (Boyd and Ellison 500.) Parents should be especially cautious of such apps and websites because it can be malicious or part of a pedophilia ring and extremely hard to detect the validity. The internet is a great resource for business, education, and research, however, too much time is wasted on social sites. Disalvo states, “Time spent using social-networking sites is growing at three times the rate of overall internet usage, accounting for almost ten percent of total time spent online.”

All things considered, elementary schools should raise awareness to help parents and guardians establish a safer online experience because children are spending more time with online activities while being exposed to real danger. Social websites recommend users to follow guidelines to protect safety and privacy but that explains just how unsafe social media is. Facebook, Myspace, Bebo and Twitter can be fun and useful in many ways but just remember to be cautious when posting information online—once it’s there you can’t take it back.

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