

## Wired for trouble

### Former BFFs and ID thieves can make online trouble for young people

By Barbara Bradley

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Stephen Spainhour, 18, a Rhodes College freshman, posted a profile on MySpace.com, the hugely popular social networking site, and watched as his reputation was almost ruined. In August a hacker stole his password; rewrote his profile to include drugs and alcohol; and posed as Spainhour through his instant messenger service, sending ugly e-mails to his parents and friends.

"That could have turned into a potentially bad situation," said Spainhour. "And I've never even been to the principal's office."

Anastasia Goodstein, author of "Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens are Really Doing Online," has heard such stories before. "In the Internet world, nothing is truly private," she said. "It's between me and you and the hacker."

She will talk about how teens are using technology at 7 p.m. today at Grace-St. Luke's Episcopal School, McClure Hall. The event is free and open to the public.

Two common troublemakers are ex-friends, and identity thieves who see young people as prime targets for credit fraud, she said.

Goodstein, who grew up in Nashville, is also the publisher of Ypulse.com, the leading independent blog for youth, teen and tween media and marketing professionals.

Adults just getting a handle on text messaging must now bone up on Web sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com, which enable users to post profiles and photos and exchange messages with friends and others in their networks. Facebook, originally confined to college and university students and those affiliated with campuses, is now open to everyone. MySpace, built on user-generated content, has a more public, global and promotional orientation. You can also link to music there, post music and write a blog.

Another popular site is YouTube.com, which started in 2005 and enables users to share videos, view clips from popular TV shows, create profiles and more.

At MySpace, Spainhour was offered links to porn sites and received e-mails inviting him to model for them. He said he opened profiles that turned out to be filled with viruses.

It takes only a valid e-mail address to access both Facebook and MySpace, which are free, said Goodstein.

MySpace has made attempts to filter underage teens and child predators, but Goodstein thinks these can be easily circumvented.

She noted that teens, who lack a credit history, are more likely to be victimized by identity thieves than predators. Posting one's full name and college or the town where one lives may be too much information, she said.

Facebook lets you "be selective about what part of your profile you want people to see," said Goodstein. "But you have to go in and actively make choices. Most people leave it on default."

If you join a network, such as an alumni group or a college, everyone in the network can see your profile. They can also copy and paste your photos to sites you never envisioned.

Ex-friends, who have had access to personal information, especially passwords, can invade your site and cause real damage, she said.

If cyber-savvy teens can become so ensnared, what about kids 12 and younger? Sites such as Club Penguin, Cyworld, Habbo Hotel, Webkinz, WeeWorld, and Stardoll offer them fantasy worlds with attractions such as mountains and caves, interactive games and chances to chat and play with other kids. Some charge subscription fees and some are funded by advertising.

At a minimum, such sites lure kids from playing outdoors and with friends. Some can lead them into the arms of advertisers and conceivably adults posing as kids. There are also more subtle problems.

"Now we have a culture where it's important to lie to protect our anonymity on line," said Judith Sachs, editor of Parentingteensonline.com. "Kids say they live in Shanghai when they really live in Nebraska. ... But what does that do to their psychology?"

On some sites kids can build avatars (animated representations of themselves) that look like human cartoon characters. Big eyes, lips and breasts are popular choices with girls.

"A body that looks like Barbie when you're 12 years old is inappropriate," said Sachs.

Parents can use the Web to counter the Web's negative influences.

Parentingteensonline offers articles on subjects such as cyberbullying, what kind of computer a teen really needs, instant messaging lingo (for example, POS means "parent over shoulder"), etc.

Kids and teens who won't listen to their Web-challenged parents about online safety may be willing to watch free videotaped messages, read articles and do activities designed for them. Check out wiresafety.org, which bills itself as the largest online safety group.

Parents can monitor a kid's online chats by purchasing software such as SafeSurf, ParentTools, NetBus, WebWatcher, NetNanny, and ENUFF Pc.

But both Goodstein and Sachs recommend simply talking to kids. "Start engaging them when they're young and building trust so that when they're 15 or 16, you'll be ready to let them have more space online," said Goodstein.

"It's very important to play with your children online," said Sachs. Young kids often eager to show you how to play can provide an opportunity to both learn the technology and check the safety of the site.

They recommend these steps:

Keep the computer in a central space -- not in a kid's bedroom.

Require kids to show their "buddy" lists and identify kids on the list.

Check their avatars and talk about them.

Keep virus and spam filters updated.

Insist on reading a teen's profile and discuss what it can mean to post provocative photos or personal information.

Fill kids in on the earmarks of a suspicious e-mailer, such as flattery, urging "secret" communications, requesting personal information or a meeting.

But don't let fear blind you to the amazing opportunities of the Internet. "What's exciting is the educational component," said Goodstein. "There are a world of resources kids are actively using and even depending on to get their homework done."

Blogging about music and videos can strengthen writing and analytical skills. Creating videos, even profiles, can lead to jobs as companies increasingly seek Web skills that make their messages attractive to young people.

Best of all, know that the Web is providing kids with a support group at their fingertips. Old pals from high school and college, destined to be lost to previous generations, can now become part of an ever-expanding circle of friends captured forever in the universal Net.

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