A Briefing for Educators:
Online Social Networking Communities and Youth Risk

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In recent months, reporters have provided a deluge of articles and television reports concerning youth risk in online social networking communities, such as MySpace, Xanga, Facebook, and the like.

This article will describe these communities, discuss the risks, and provide guidance for educators on addressing the risks.

Online social networking environments are a relatively recent, and highly attractive, online phenomena. In these communities, members establish profiles that provide personal information, photos, music, and graphics about their interests. Members can establish blogs (web logs) to post their own commentary. The members then make connections or links with other members ("friends") who share similar interests and encourage friends to post comments in their blog. Additionally, such sites provide instant messaging capabilities and discussion groups around different areas of interest.

Many of these sites allow students from a particular school to establish a school-related discussion group. Some sites seek student applicants to serve as the moderators of the school discussion groups.

Most of these sites have Use Agreements that prohibit harmful speech, impersonation, and other inappropriate or potentially dangerous activities. These sites generally have a minimum age requirement of at least 13, but many younger youth know they can lie about their age to register. There are no effective technologies or processes that can ensure accurate age verification at this age. School officials, parents, and teens can file complaints with the sites.

Social networking sites present opportunities for self-expression and friendship building. Youth "playtime" in such environments is building skills that will be a foundation for success in the 21st century.

Many teens are safely and responsibly engaged in such communities. They are using their profiles to build and experiment with aspects of their own personal identity. They are making connections that are contributing to their social well-being and expanding their perspectives and understandings of themselves, their close friends, and other people from throughout the world. Many have developed personal standards and guidelines for safe and responsible behavior on these sites

There are many positive examples of interactions in these communities: A young man who has been dealing with critical illness is receiving constant messages of support and caring from his online friends. High school students are communicating regularly with a recent graduate who is now stationed in Iraq. Students created a memorial for an online friend who was killed in a car accident.

Adults should not underestimate the attractiveness of these online environments – or expect that the legitimate concerns associated with these environments and a "just say no" response will make the environments or the associated concerns magically disappear. These environments are a natural progression of Internet information and communications technologies. They are attractive to teens and are here to stay.

The Concerns

There are legitimate concerns about youth involvement in these social networking communities. The concerns are grounded in three basic factors:

- Some teens, as is to be expected, are not making good choices.

- Many parents are not paying sufficient attention.

- Dangerous adults are attracted to environments where teens are not making good choices and parents are not paying sufficient attention.

Teen Decision-making

As has been revealed in brain research studies, teens have immature frontal lobe development and, therefore, simply do not have the "hardwiring" necessary to consistently make well-reasoned, appropriate decisions.

The lack of effective decision-making capacity is especially problematical in electronic environments, where it is more difficult to understand the connection between actions and consequences. Online disinhibition is caused by the "you can't see me, I can't see you" phenomenon. The perception of invisibility and lack of tangible feedback in online environments interferes with three key factors that help guide responsible decision-making – social disapproval, detection leading to discipline, and the recognition an action caused harm to others or self.

Many youth are using these sites to explore their personal identity and establish "social status." Unfortunately, under today's societal standards, these activities tend to encourage the presentation of provocative, intimate information that can cross the lines of safety and appropriateness. Boys may seek to establish their identity and status by posting materials demonstrating their independence and bravery and seek connections with lots of girls who are "hot." Girls may post sexually suggestive pictures and titillating details to establish their status as "hot," not fully recognizing the advertising implications of doing so in a public environment. Alternatively, youth who have different gender orientations are publicly exploring their identity and relationships.

Unfortunately, another activity that can be involved in establishing social status is harassing or denigrating those who are considered to be "losers." Students who feel depressed or are treated as outcasts may establish their own "outcast groups" that can promote anger and hatred or provide support for self-harm, such as cutting, anorexia, or suicide. Social status may be addressed by forming hate groups or gangs.

It appears that for many members of these communities, social status is determined by the number of friendship links – not the quality of friendship relationships. The presentation of intimate, outrageous, dangerous, or irresponsible information appears to be a popular strategy to attract attention oneself for the purpose of collecting such numerous friendship links and thus proving one's popularity.

These actions are a variation of the same identity formation and social status games played out in every hallway in every middle and high school in the country. Teen exploration and experimentation in the formation of their personal identity is a well-recognized, normal stage of development. But many parents and educators will feel understandably uncomfortable with the idea that youth are exploring their emerging personal identity in such a public manner. Young people appear to be significantly unaware of the degree to which the material posted online is very public and potentially permanently available online.

Lack of Parental Attention

Many parents are not paying sufficient attention to what their teens are doing online because …

• Parents may not have sufficient knowledge and technical skills to keep up with their teens.

• Parents may be excessively busy and/or are not home to supervise online activity.

• Parents may have misplaced reliance on "parental controls" or filtering software.

• Parents may have the notion that they should respect their teen's online privacy and fail to understand that these are public places where their teen may be at risk or may engage in inappropriate, even illegal, behavior.

• Or they may simply be unaware of the dangers and concerns and think that because their teen is using a computer at home, he or she is safe and engaged in responsible behavior.

Parents must be fully aware of the fact that the companies managing these online sites cannot, and should not be expected to, "baby-sit" their children. Parents bear the responsibility for such oversight.

Dangerous Strangers Online

Dangerous adults are also present in these environments. This includes sexual predators, child pornographers, hate group recruiters, and others. These very dangerous adults are masters at manipulating vulnerable youth. Many teens have developed effective "creep alert" detection skills. Unfortunately, youth who are already "at risk," who are "searching for love in all the wrong places" are the most vulnerable to seduction by predators and are less likely to exercise caution.

Youth Online Risk

The concerns of youth risk in social networking environments include:

- **Unsafe disclosure of personal information** – providing potentially dangerous or damaging personal information, including personal contact information, sexually suggestive information or images, intimate information about concerns or troubles they are facing in life, or images or information about engagement in ill-advised, illegal, or irresponsible behavior, such as drinking, drug abuse, sexual activities, wild parties, and the like. Many teens appear to have no understanding that what they post in these sites is public, potentially permanent, accessible by anyone in the world, and could result in damage to themselves or others.

- **Cyberbullying** – being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material online or through a cell phone or engaging in other cruel or hurtful actions. Cyberbullying is causing significant emotional harm to others – resulting in depression, anger, school failure and avoidance, school violence, and suicide.

- **Cyberthreats** – posting direct threats or distressing material. Students may post material that appears to be a direct imminent threat. Students may also post distressing material that provides strong clues about the potential for violence or suicide. Some of the recent school shooters had posted concerning material online prior to the school shootings!

- **Risky sexual behavior** – being seduced by a sexual predator or child pornographer, self-producing child pornography, or making connections with other teens for sexual "hook-ups." Youth, including girls and boys, who post sexually suggestive photos or information or discuss intimate personal matters are most vulnerable.

- **Dangerous communities** – "at risk" youth making connections with other "at risk" youth or adults to discuss and share information on suicide, anorexia or bulimia, hate group activities, gang activities, passing out games, bomb-making, hacking, and the like. Involvement in these communities results in a shared belief in the appropriateness of harmful or anti-social thoughts and activities.

- **Addiction** – spending an excessive amount of time online, resulting in lack of healthy engagement in major areas of life – family, friends, school, homework, work, exercise, personal interests, and sleep. Internet addiction is a behavioral addiction. For some teens, addiction to these online communities is leading to school failure. Addiction to these sites fuels efforts to circumvent the filter to get to the sites during school.

Filtering Follies

It is important to recognize how the concerns related to online social networking communities have shifted. The major concern expressed when youth started going online was youth access to pornography. Filtering software, which promised to block access to unacceptable material, was promoted as the tool that could effectively address this concern. Unfortunately, far too many parents and school officials, think that blocking access will make the problems go away. The false security that has been generated through reliance on these tools has undermined the establishment of effective education and supervision practices, at school or at home.

The issues presented by the online social networking communities are associated with what youth are publishing and with whom they are communicating. These activities are far more enticing to students than accessing pornography. It is exceptionally easy for students to create or use proxy servers to get around the school filter to access these sites.

With access becoming ubiquitous, including through cell phones, the misplaced reliance on filtering or blocking technologies will become even more dangerous. Effective education of youth and monitoring of youth online activities is essential.

Issues for Educators to Address

Youth involvement in online social networking environments is impacting students and the school environment. While it is reasonable for school districts to seek to block students from accessing these sites from school, given the fact that these sites do not have significant educational value, blocking access to such sites will likely not be effective, will not fully address the concerns, and can have a very damaging ramification. These are the issues that must be addressed:

- School threat assessment and suicide prevention plans must incorporate online speech.

- Safe school personnel must be able to immediately access and review online material posted by a student in the event of a report of concern and may be prevented from doing so by the school filter.

- School officials should realize that in most cases harmful or dangerous speech posted in these sites or an underage registration is a violation of the Use Agreement. These concerns will be addressed upon the filing of a complaint. Sites will also work with law enforcement to identify anonymous users and preserve material.

- Relying solely on school's Internet filtering service to block access to these sites will likely not prevent student involvement on these sites from the school campus. Better monitoring is necessary.

- Off-campus activities of students can have a damaging impact on the well-being of students and the school climate and could lead to school violence. Students and parents should be encouraged to report online concerns. A process must be in place to effectively respond to reports.

- Educating staff, students, and parents about safe and responsible Internet use is critically important.

Threat Assessment and Suicide Plans
It is essential that all school threat assessment protocols and suicide prevention plans be revised to reflect the reality that it is highly likely – if not virtually guaranteed – that young people will be posting or sending material online that will provide significant insight into their emotional well-being and potentially dangerous plans!

Unfortunately, online material that appears to be a threat could range from a joke, a game or a rumor to a legitimate serious threat. The poster may be anonymous or impersonation may be involved. Careful analysis of the online material and avoiding an overreaction simply because the material is posted online is essential. Most sites are fully prepared to respond to a law enforcement subpoena.

School Official Override of the Filter
It is imperative that all safe school personnel have immediate ability to override the school's Internet filter to gain rapid access to any Internet site for the purpose of assessing online material related to potential danger to the school or any student associated with the school!

Imagine this scenario: A parent or student reports to a school principal, counselor, or school resource officer that a student has posted information on a site that raises concerns the student might be considering an act of violence, suicide, or other self-harm, may be engaged in cyberbullying, may be engaged in gang or hate group activity, or any other type of concern. The principal, counselor, or school resource officer seeks to review the concerning material online – only to find that access is blocked by the Internet filtering system and there is no ability to override the filter. This is a situation that is present in many schools.

Ensuring that all safe school personnel have the capability and authority to override the filter presents both policy considerations and technical issues:

- It is generally possible, technically, to grant override privileges to school staff with most Internet filtering systems, if such systems are employed within the district. It is more difficult to provide override capabilities if the filtering is managed at a county, region, or state level. It is essential that the override capability be rapidly integrated into all school filtering systems and procedures.

- There may be fear that a district policy decision that allows staff to override the filter will lead to misuse of this privilege to access inappropriate material. School districts will have to accept this risk and seek to address such concerns through clear policies, effective monitoring, and appropriate consequences for misuse.

Prompt Removal of Online Material
School officials may not realize that it is a violation of the Use Agreement of most of these sites to post harmful speech, to impersonate someone, or to register if you are underage. It is generally possible to seek the removal of harmful material by filing a complaint with the site. A request to remove material in violation of a site's Use Agreement does not raise free speech concerns.

The Use Agreement is generally accessible from the home page of the site. There is also generally a "Contact Us" link on this page. Most sites will respond promptly to remove harmful material, especially if asked by a school official. However, schools should recognize that these sites will likely not remove all material that a school official might find offensive, such as posting of legitimate concerns about school actions or the behavior of school staff.

Prior to filing a complaint, it is highly recommended that all harmful material be downloaded and preserved. If the student posting the harmful material continues to engage in harmful activities, having this evidence of past activity will be important.

School administrators should also realize that it is entirely possible for student(s) to impersonate other students, or the student(s) may be anonymous. But in all of these communities, linking to "friends" is part of the fun. It is highly likely that an administrator will be able to determine the identity of some students who are linked on the site through their pictures or usernames. With careful questioning, these students will likely be willing to disclose their knowledge of the identity of the student(s) responsible for the site.

To have the material removed, a school administrator should contact the site through the "Contact Us" link. This link generally leads to an online form to file a complaint. It is necessary to provide the specific URL of the page on the site with the harmful material.

If the material posted on the site demonstrates the age of the child, e.g. "I am in 6th grade," a school official can file a complaint to have the user account terminated. Otherwise, the parent would need to contact the site. Some sites also allow parents to request the removal of their child's account – all should. But sites have to be careful to get verification.

Student Access While On-Campus
Despite the effort to block access to sites using the school's filter, students can find ways to access the social networking sites while at school. Students can set up or use a proxy service to circumvent the school filter. Student may, and in the future clearly will, be able to access such sites through cell phones or personal digital devices. An alarming situation present in schools today is that students are able to get around the school's

filter to post material on these sites, but school officials lack the ability to review such postings. This situation must change.

While there is no case on point, this situation raises liability issues. What would the district's liability be if students were found to have been planning a school attack or are racially harassing other students via the district's Internet system or when using cell phones on campus? Most cases of this nature would consider whether or not the school had taken reasonable precautions. What are reasonable precautions should a district take?

At a minimum, schools should engage in needs assessment, have policies and practices in place that address such concerns, provide effective education and notice to students and staff, ensure effective supervision and monitoring, encourage the reporting of any harmful or threatening speech, and establish an effective approach to review and respond to reports or concerns.

Off-campus Activity Impacting the School or Well-being of Students
Schools should also be concerned about off-campus Internet communications, especially cyberbullying and cyberthreats. Cyberbullying activities in social networking communities, as well as through other technologies, may be negatively impacting student well-being and the quality of the school environment. There are emerging reports of school violence, and even one school murder (in Japan), as well as youth suicide, associated with cyberbullying.

There are issues of student free speech rights associated off-campus speech. There have been no cases specifically addressing harmful students-against-student off-campus, online speech. In cases involving online speech directed at school staff, the courts have applied the standard first announced in *Tinker v Des Moines,* 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The *Tinker* standard allows schools to respond to student speech if there is a substantial and material disruption or threat of disruption in the work of the school or the rights of students to be secure.

In many cases, it will be possible for school officials to establish a "school nexus," such as related on-campus bullying incidents that are associated with the online material. However, it is essential that school officials address the entire situation. In some cases, harmful online material may have been posted in retaliation for on-campus bullying. In other cases, it may be a

continuation thereof. It is also necessary to establish that the harmful speech has or can reasonably be predicted to cause a material disruption or threat of disruption.

Beyond the question of formal discipline, there are actions that can and should be taken to address these situations. These actions include contacting the parents of the cyberbully to solicit their assistance in responding to the matter and supporting the targeted student and his or her parents in getting harmful material removed from any online site.

There are special challenges for school officials at the middle school level. For many sites, the minimum age for registration is 13 years old – approximately mid-way through the middle school years. This creates a situation where there is incredible social pressure on younger students to lie about their age to become part of their school's online social networking scene. Given the developmental challenges present during this age range, ideally it would be nice to keep all middle school students out of these environments.

Middle school officials may want to engage in specific discussions with their parent's group around this issue. Seeking to establish a parent standard that discourages involvement in these communities until high school could provide every parent with some helpful leverage to tell their child that this is an online activity for older teens.

Education for Students, Parents, and Staff

The process of empowering students to make safe and responsible Internet decisions online can be compared to the process by which young people empowered to safety cross a busy street. When children are too young to recognize the dangers, parents hold their hand. As they grow, parents stay by their side and talk about safety and good decision-making. Parents progressively back off, allowing children to make decisions on their own, but keeping an eye on their choices. At some point in time, parents feel confident that children are capable of making safe and responsible decisions on their own.

Education of middle and high school students about these social networking communities must be grounded in the provision of the knowledge, skills, and values so that eventually they can be expected to independently exercise good judgment.

Internet safety and responsible use is everyone's concern, but is especially a concern for parents because most youth Internet use occurs at home. Schools can help educate parents how to provide guidelines for safe and responsible Internet usage and monitor their children's online activities at home until such time that they are assured their children are making good choices.

One significant reason that students may be able to engage in harmful online activity while at school is that teachers have not been provided with sufficient professional development to make effective educational use of technologies. Allowing students to engage in "Internet recess" can lead to troubling online activities. Teachers need to have a good understanding of the expectations placed on them when they are engaging students in online learning activities, the potential risks, as well as how to lead students in exciting, educationally enriching online activities.

Many innovative teachers are establishing online environments similar to these social networking communities to support high quality instructional activities. It is necessary to take care in the use of such environments for instruction -- including establishing clear standards for the kinds of material that can be posted, ensuring teacher preview of all materials prior to posting, and having an effective mechanism to respond to any concerns about material that has been posted. Involving students in these kinds of instructional activities provides an excellent vehicle to address the safety and responsible use concerns of such environments.

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