The Caution Light is Flashing on the Information Technology Highway

Dear Parents:

Each fall university presidents, school superintendents and principals take the opportunity to offer important advice to parents. These education leaders provide words of encouragement and hopefulness along with advice on avoiding risky behaviors. The internet and the social networking phenomenon add a challenging dimension to the list of opportunities and hazards that students of all ages must navigate.

Few developments in the world of information technology and computer science have been embraced by students of all ages and interests, as quickly as social networking tools. Social networking includes everything from the common spaces such as MySpace.com, Facebook.com and Classmates.com to lesser known spaces such as Xanga.com, Tagged.com, and Bebo.com. These sites can be reached from computers, cell phones and other handheld devices. Things like podcasts, video podcasts, blogs, YouTube and Second Life are now part of the mainstream media and we need to know how that affects our communication with others.

You might ask why so many children get involved in social networking. Dr. Nazli Hardy, assistant professor of computer science at Millersville University, investigated that issue and has developed a program with Penn Manor School District’s director of technology, Charlie Reisinger, to help educate parents on internet safety.

Hardy reports that peer pressure drives children to join social networking groups. They want to fit in and try to do so by creating an online profile. Children may feel more comfortable and less self-conscious expressing themselves online. Children who are shy or reserved may not have many friends, so they choose to make friends online. It is also interesting to meet people online from other parts of our country or the world. Students are no longer limited by geography to interact only with their classmates at school.

On the positive side, social networking can be incorporated into classroom learning; and many teachers use it for effective dissemination of information, to provide support and help, and serve as a collaborative platform for projects. It can also enable family and friends to keep in touch, share photos and stories, and serve as a platform for people to support similar causes e.g. against AIDS and hunger. Used well, social networking can help us stay in contact with our family and circle of friends. It also has great potential for connecting people who share similar interests in politics, social, educational, hobbies, etc.
Here is where the caution light starts flashing. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, more than 50% of young people have suffered an "unwanted experience" (including sexual abuse and bullying) through social networking sites. These sites provide ample prey for cyberbullies, ID thieves, and may further expose children to pornographic and other inappropriate materials.

As parents you have insisted that children wear helmets, seatbelts, have regular meals, and obey curfews. Now you must also insist on online safety. In their program, Hardy and Reisinger urge parents to talk to their children frankly about the Internet, starting at a young age to establish boundaries. Some of their ideas include:

1. Collect articles regarding online dangers and discuss them with your children.
2. Make sure your children are not talking to strangers online.
3. Keep computers in a central location (living room) or open environment.
4. Establish limits as to what information your child gives out online, even to friends – a birth date can be used for identity theft.
5. Become familiar with social networking so you can discuss it intelligently – ask your children to help you learn.
6. Limit the amount of time your children spend on the computer.
7. Install antivirus and other protective software or spybots to limit virus or worm attacks (software that filters many online predators can be downloaded at http://www.protectingeachother.com/)

Parents, please be sure to urge your children that before they post pictures on a social networking site, they carefully consider that anyone can copy and send these pictures all over the world and without their permission. Ask them if they want their friends, family, future employers, future grad school, or future spouse to see these pictures?

Social networking is a current fact of life. I believe we must learn how to use it to our advantage to better ensure the safety of our students and children. The challenge for parents and school leaders is to find the appropriate balance between the benefits and risks of these new communication tools. The tools can be great for the teachers to use and great for keeping in contact with friends. However, they can also lead us to a dangerous place - a place where we need to enter with caution.