

# Socializing in CYBERSPACE

Internet social networks are safer—and more beneficial—than many parents realize

Text...Ken Wysocky

I have a confession to make: cyberhip, I am not.

Take websites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Xanga, for instance. Their enormous popularity probably confounds me as much as my preference for reading newspapers would puzzle today's teens. And when I hear about cyberbullying and child predators on the Internet, my bafflement morphs into outright concern, both for my college-age daughters and two younger children.

Fortunately, there's less risk than you might suppose, asserts teen-media guru Anastasia Goodstein. In fact, social networking is not only healthy, it just might help your child land a good job someday, she suggests.

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The author of *Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens are Really Doing Online* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2007), Goodstein has been immersed in teen media for more than 15 years. Her current brainchild is Ypulse ([www.ypulse.com](http://www.ypulse.com)), a website that tracks youth culture for the media and marketers.

"With any new technology or media, the older generation doesn't quite understand it," she reassures me. "These websites are the online equivalent of hanging out at the mall or at a basketball game. It's contact with friends they see all day at school—they're keeping that conversation going.

"Teens are terribly busy today," she adds. "And with malls putting more and more restrictions on teens, there are fewer places for

them to socialize. So these sites meet the core needs of teens to socialize away from their parents.”

In addition, Goodstein believes these networks help teens sort out who they are.

“It’s really validating to teenagers when friends visit their page, and teenagers are all about validation,” she notes. “They’re trying to find out who they are, and what their peers think of them is important. Plus, the instant feedback is exciting.”

## Misconceptions abound

Goodstein says that contrary to popular belief, the Internet is not teeming with predators with whom children naively associate.

“While there are predators out there, the reality is that most teenagers talk to people they know or know through a friend,” she observes. “Most kids don’t want to talk to adults!”

A teen that associates with a predator online most likely already engages in other risky behaviors, such as attending college parties and engaging in underage drinking. Besides, social websites include many security safeguards that, if used properly, prevent contact with strangers, Goodstein points out.

“I’d be more concerned about identity theft,” she warns. “Teens are very attractive targets because they have no credit history.”

On the plus side, social networking teaches children valuable career skills, Goodstein says.

As evidence, she points to Ashley Qualls, a Detroit, Michigan, teenager whose penchant for creating eye-catching layouts for her friends’ Internet profile pages grew into a business worth more than \$1 million ([www.whateverlife.com](http://www.whateverlife.com)).

“Universities are already adding classes pertaining to social networking,” she emphasizes. “This is not going away. In fact, it’s a skill sought by more and more employers.”

“In marketing, sales, and promotions, it’s

## Five Tips to Help Your Teen Socialize Securely

- 1 Don’t share passwords. Best friends come and go, and couples break up.
- 2 When you create your page, thoroughly review the security settings. Many sites automatically provide less secure settings, so you must opt out to protect your privacy.
- 3 Ignore cyber-harassment and report it immediately (most networks offer e-mail links to report abuse).
- 4 Before you post an item, consider what a parent, a college recruiter, or a potential employer might think.
- 5 Ask friends for permission to post photos that include them.

all about who you know and how many people you know,” she continues. “Employees who have no idea how these sites work will be at a definite disadvantage.”

## What’s a parent to do?

So how can cyber-challenged, 40-something-year-old parents like myself be sure their children are cyber-socializing securely and responsibly? While there are steps you can take (see sidebar), communication is the key.

“If you openly communicate about other issues, then communicating about their digital lives should be a natural extension of that,” Goodstein observes. “I’m not opposed to using software to control their use, although even at ages 11 and 12, kids are pretty crafty about getting around filters.”

While she doesn’t encourage spying, Goodstein says it’s justifiable if your child acts suspiciously.



Working with online groups can help your child learn valuable life skills...not to mention a good job.

“You can find their page to see what they’re blogging about,” she says. “Your child may think it’s an invasion of privacy, but the sites are already very public.”

A better approach, Goodstein suggests, is to ask your children where they like to hang out online or ask them to help you create your own profile on Facebook.

“You’ll begin to demystify what it is they’re doing, which is what teens always have been doing—they’re just doing it digitally,” she concludes.

Hmm...maybe I *should* create my own Facebook page. I’ll get right on it—as soon as I finish reading the newspaper. ✱

### meet the author



**Ken Wysocky** is a freelance writer from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ken, with more than 25 years of editorial and communications experience, specializes in writing about health and lifestyle, business, travel, and gardening. He enjoys spending time with his wife and two children.

