

## ***Facing up to Facebook***

Once upon a time the internet was the domain of computer gurus, a place only accessible by strange coding and complicated computer programs. How times have changed! Today, the internet provides an extensive social network in which people of all ages are able to contribute. With the advent of websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube, this has all come about very rapidly. It is now easy for just about anyone with some computer skills to have a “web presence”. While this is a good thing in many ways, as carers for young people we need to ensure that they understand the right and wrong ways in which these sites can be used, so that they are not exposing themselves to dangerous situations. To be fair, sites such as Facebook do give some guidelines, cautioning just what information users should place on their site. But do all users read them? And do they apply these cautions? Not always. At the same time, Facebook introduces a lot of apps which users can add to their page, and some of the details required can be quite searching and reveal far more information than might be desirable. Parents and users of Facebook should be aware of the following:

- These web sites are very public spaces which anyone can read.
- People may not be who they say they are i.e. they may lie about their age and other details
- It is not a place to show off – e.g. users should not put anything on Facebook or similar sites which, for example, they wouldn’t want their parents, grandparents or teachers to see.

When using Facebook and similar web sites, advice to students should include:

- Don’t get caught giving out personal details such as address, phone number, bank details or social plans.
- Be careful what photos you post online – stalkers are very good at pasting bits of information together.
- Be careful about posting information to different sites which are linked. Information can be added together to form lots of information about a particular user.

This message is not meant to be alarmist, but aimed at getting students and their families **talking about the issues raised**. Media coverage has highlighted some instances of students being subjected to harassment, stalking and worse, after incidents where kids have agreed to meet with ‘buddies’ from the internet, or have been stalked by their ‘16-year-old friend’ (who is actually somewhat older).

With proper use and careful consideration of the information added to these sites, they can be a lot of fun, and enable a new kind of social networking. Some can give voice to otherwise shy students, or help develop competence and confidence with computers. Businesses may recruit (or vet) applicants online using social networking sites, and many bands have promoted their talents successfully via YouTube and MySpace! Thus, the answer is not outright bans or censorship of these technologies, but consideration and modelling of the right ways to use such facilities, and the start of a family or community conversation which aims to protect student users.

For further information on this subject, you can visit the following web sites:

- *Connect Safely - a Parent’s Guide*. <http://www.connectsafely.org/Safety-Advice-Articles/facebook-for-parents.html> (includes a link to a comprehensive guide to Facebook)
- *How to stay in control – social networking*. [http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/site/control\\_sn.asp](http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/site/control_sn.asp)
- *10 Tips for Protecting Your Children’s Privacy on Social Networking Sites*.  
<http://www.yourkidsed.com.au/info/10-tips-for-protecting-your-childrens-privacy-on-social-networking-sites>

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