

I wrote a recent article to the missionary family (May PFL Newsletter) about MKs and blogging. I would like to send you a recent article from On Course Magazine about blogging and virtual relationships. I believe that these are concerns that you need to be aware of, and your kids need to be kept informed. I remember sitting in a teenager's room in Brussels while he was Instant Messaging (IM) a young lady in the States. As an MK, 16 years old, he wrote "I am 19 years old, and play basketball professionally here in Belgium." I was dying! As his youth pastor, I asked him what in the world he was saying! He basically said "she'll never know," and "it's just for fun." What that taught me was simple – if an MK can sit there and make up who they are, imagine what the person on the other end of the conversation is doing!

There was another great article in the recent Pentecostal Evangel on this same topic. I would recommend that you read it. You may be one of those parents that assumes this doesn't relate to you. Let me tell you that it does! My daughter is 9, and she is already interested in email friends. Most of our college students have their own blog site. The idea and concept of blogging will not go away. It is here to stay, and you need to be preparing for it, along with your kids. You need to become familiar with what is happening, so you can help your kids make righteous decisions on the internet. Perhaps you only have dial-up. Let me ask you this, will your kids only have dial-up when they return to the States? Probably not.

We appreciate all your prayers for the upcoming CS/PFO/SOM. It looks like we are going to have one of our largest years ever. I believe we are going to have over 300 kids involved in the MK programs! We are still trying to work on staff, simply because we have so many little ones coming! Keep our staff in your prayers. I believe that they are the key to making the summer programs successful.

Blessings,

Chad Phillips

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Cool Friends or Dirty Old Men — Who are you Chatting With?

by Ned McIntosh

A local newspaper reports on a 35-year-old man who began stalking 16-year-old Emily* over the Internet. She asked him to stop contacting her and blocked his username. The man then changed his username in order to be able to regain contact with Emily. After repeatedly requesting that he leave her alone, the man continued to stalk the teen, even going so far as to drop off a CD at Emily's home. The man was arrested and felony charges were filed against him.

It was later discovered through a warranted search of his home that he was in possession of pornographic videos of teenage girls.

Don't be an Emily*

According to Focus on the Family, in a typical week about 21 million students are plugged into cyberspace. While some students are going online just for practical reasons, such as research, homework help and general surfing, more and more students are hitting the Internet looking for new friends.

However, you may be surprised by the number of your peers, like Emily, who are risking their identities, their safety and even their lives by responding to emails from and/or instant messaging or chatting with unknown persons, posting personal identifying info that others can see and setting up face-to-face meetings with online strangers.

A Clever Disguise

Frequent chat room visitors often seek the “Cloak of Anonymity,” where they can impersonate whoever they want to be. Studies by the FBI and others say most “friends” on the Internet don’t tell the truth in describing themselves. If you decide to meet your Cyber friend, it’s like gambling on a blind date, but with potentially more serious results.

The Internet has opened up a new world for impersonators, but there have been notable examples, even before the Internet took hold. One was portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio in the film, *Catch Me If You Can*, directed by Steven Spielberg. It was based on the true story of Frank Abagnale, Jr., who by the age of 21 had already posed as a doctor, lawyer, an airline pilot and a college professor. When reality closed in on him he went to jail.

Getting Personal

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, one in every five students who uses the Internet is sexually solicited online. The center is getting together with teens to promote a new public awareness campaign called “Don’t Believe the Type.” That 15-year-old “friend” may in fact be a 40 year-old pedophile scoping out his next victim. Sadly the police reports are full of “The Emily Files” — some with even more tragic consequences of naïve teens revealing personal information about themselves. Even if they don’t take the precarious step of arranging to meet their anonymous “chat room buddy,” they can become the victim of identity theft, a stalker or worse. Or that 15-year-old “friend” may be an FBI agent, setting a trap for a pedophile and may catch you in the same trap if you are impersonating someone you aren’t in a chat room.

In a recent “Dateline NBC” continuing series of reports on Internet sex predators, the camera caught 51 men in Southern California who arranged meetings with teen guys and girls after having sexually explicit chat room conversations. One after the other, each man entered the “meeting house” and found himself in a heated dialogue with reporter Chris Hanson. At the same time, federal authorities waited in the shadows to take the predators into custody.

But it’s not just the obvious X-rated conversations that students should be leery of. Even kids have been victims of Cyberspace abuse with the proliferation of group games on the Internet, where they compete with anonymous other gamers. When I asked an 11-year-old boy what would happen if one of those cyber-gamers asked for his phone number or email address, he answered, “I would report him to the Game Master, who will suspend his privileges.”

But the real question is how should you respond? First, make sure you consult your parents before you give away any information, including photos and Web cam footage, to someone online. Secondly, when your “cyber buddy” starts asking personal questions like age, phone number, where you hang out or personal stats, it is time to sign off — permanently!

Play It Safe

But all warnings aside, what if you and your cyber friend live in the same city and you want to meet up one day for lunch? You’ve got to take precautions and that starts with asking your parents for permission. If you met a friend the normal way, your parents would want to meet your friend at least by phone. Right? Then, if they agree that it’s OK, arrange to meet your cyber friend in a crowded public setting, such as the food court at the mall, and take Mom or Dad with you. If you don’t want Mom or Dad tagging along, bring a couple of good friends — an older brother or sister would qualify — with you.

The final safety net would be good old common sense. Never get in the car or get lured off into a secluded place with a stranger, no matter their age or how good you think you might

know the person. Your cyber friend is still a stranger and may not be what he or she pretends to be. The inside of a car or desolate wooded area is not the place to find out.

***Editor's note:** Although Emily's situation is based on a true story, her name was changed to protect privacy.

Online link: For a list of stats on teen Internet use, follow the links at <oncourse.ag.org>.

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