

Keeping Kids Safe

We must make it a priority to know what our youth are saying and doing in cyberspace.

Virtually everyone has heard of MySpace. With more than 90 million users, it has become the most popular social network on the Web. Whether or not you know much about it, you can be assured that your kids do.

About 20 million teenagers in America have a MySpace account, which they use to meet new friends, connect with old friends, post pictures and write online journals—sharing their thoughts for the whole world to see.

Millions of teenagers spend several hours each day on this site for entertainment and interaction.

The problem many parents are not aware of is that not everyone on MySpace is a teenager. Many adults are online for legitimate social-networking purposes themselves, but untold thousands of them are online predators posing as teenagers. They hope to begin a relationship that will ultimately lead to a sexual encounter.

Time magazine recently reported that a 14-year-old girl was raped by a 19-year-old Texan named Pete Solis after he met her on MySpace. The girl's mother is now suing MySpace for \$30 million alleging the company did not take proper precautions to protect her child from Internet pedophiles.

The latest data show that 71 percent of people who join MySpace accept the "friendship" of other users who are actually strangers to them. The scary part is that 41 percent

of youth respond to invitations from people they don't know.

It may look innocent enough to see your teenager sitting at a computer, talking and swapping pictures with an online friend, but do you have any idea who is on the other end? There is no way to verify online the age and profile of a person.

Our young people are more vulnerable than ever to cunning and smooth-talking criminals.

The pornography on the site does not help either. Even though the company tells people that they should not post inappropriate pictures, the indecency and imitation of celebrity crudeness on many teen MySpace sites would cause some adults to shiver.

As a concerned parent or ministry worker you are no doubt asking yourself what can be done to protect young people from the threat of online predators and other criminals.

For starters, make sure your computer is in an open room and has the most effective protection software to block pornography. In addition, ask your kids lots of questions. Who are they talking to? When you look at the list of friends they have on MySpace, you should know all of them.

A more thorough way to protect your kids is to help them switch over to My Battle Plan at [http://www.mypbp.com](#). On this site, I not only help them connect with friends, but also help them establish a plan to grow their faith and be held accountable to that plan. They will begin to set spiritual goals and learn to encourage others to make an impact for Christ.

As parents, leaders and laypeople, our involvement and

protection is needed now more than ever. The stakes are high because we face the possibility of losing an entire generation. The future of America is right before our eyes.

If you have a desire to see young people protected, saved and on fire for God but don't know how to get started, I suggest you attend one of the leadership summits listed on the site.

We need to defend and rescue our kids. It is no longer enough for us to say, "We didn't know." We have the opportunity to be informed and equipped, so we must make it a priority to know what our youth are saying and doing in cyberspace. We must seize the moment and capture the heart of this generation before the next predator does.

Ron Luce founded Teen Mania in 1986. He and his wife, Katie, have seen more than 2 million youth attend events they host called Acquire the Fire, and they have sent more than 50,000 teens across the globe on mission trips. Ron and Katie live in Garden Valley, Texas, with their three children: Hannah, Charity and Cameron. To read past columns in Charisma by Ron Luce, log on at