

The World's Biggest Billboard

There's a lot of information we give away online, just by forgetting to click on privacy settings, or by giving more information than we have to. There are three other ways our children can innocently give away information about themselves - by posting personal profiles, by filling out contest and registration forms, and by building a web site. There are some many databases that could list your child's address, phone number, and e-mail address.

Knowing how our children can innocently give out information online, and how easily information about them can be found by strangers, is one of the important things I can teach you.

Online Profiles - Advertising for Trouble

What is a Profile?

A profile is a list of personal information that certain services let you post online to allow other subscribers to know more about you, your hobbies, etc. A profile helps you find others with similar interests online. It also helps them to find you (your child).

How Does a Profile Work?

Profiles are often included as a free feature for members of AOL, other Internet service providers, and many free e-mail services. The service may ask you questions that you can answer, and have your answers searchable to others online. Usually they include "A/S/L," cybershorthand for age/gender (sex)/location. (Generally, these are the first questions asked of a newcomer in a chatroom.)

How are Profiles Abused?

Many unsuspecting children give their real names - and other personal information - on their profiles with out thinking twice. These profiles can then be searched online, using a special search feature. While this lets you find others with similar interests, like skateboarding or the Backstreet Boys, it too can be abused. (You aren't really surprised, are you? By now you should be getting a sense of how things work online.)

People who don't have your child's well-being at heart can search for all birth dates by year, so that they can find preteen or young teenagers born in a certain year. Profiles of all thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds could then pop up. They can search further by gender and by state. The technology can help them locate exactly what they're looking for in a geographically desirable location.

Sometimes, although kids may be careful about posting personal information, they post provocative phrases or flame others. (That's cybertalk for being rude, insulting, or trying to provoke arguments with or among others online. I talk about this in depth in the "Dark Side" chapter and in "Ms. Parry's Rules for Correct Internet Behavior" in chapter 7.)

Teenagers also often play practical jokes on their friends by using their passwords to access their friend's profile and posting something provocative. (And anything provocative gets a quick response in cyberspace.) That's why we teach them not to share passwords with anyone, even their friends (especially their friends!).

What Can You Do About It?

The simplest solution is to make sure your children don't post a profile. The second-best option is to make sure any profile they do post doesn't contain personal information, such as their real names, addresses, schools, sports team names, birth dates, or ages (they can use a grade to confuse the technology search instead), or provocative information. You should review what they want to post to make sure it's generic and scandal-free.

If they already have a profile, review it and make sure they change everything that is provocative or can be

used to find them off-line. And check back frequently to make sure it stays safe.

Filling Out Forms Online - Giving Away Personal Information

I deal in depth with online privacy and data collection from our kids in “Protecting Our Kids’ Privacy” in Chapter 4, but you need to be aware that our kids are filling out forms for contests, registrations, and newsletters all the time. Make sure you teach them to check with you first, and to fill out forms only at trusted sites with a privacy policy. If your child is under thirteen, new laws require the site to get your okay first.

Kids’ Personal Web Sites

Many Internet service providers, online services, and other web sites (like Yahoo!) provide free web sites for anyone who wants one. This gives our children a chance to be creative and express their opinions. Many teachers are encouraging their students to develop Web pages, too.

How Are They Abused?

Kids are always building sites that tell more than they should about themselves. They list their schools, sports teams, even sometimes their telephone numbers, photos, and addresses. They almost always include their e-mail addresses.

The only good thing is that most of these personal web pages are difficult to find, since they are normally not registered with search engines, and are too obscure to find in a search. And the harder it is for you to find the web site, the less likely it is that anyone else can find it.

If your kids have a web site, look it over-not just as a parental cop, but because it might show you how creative your child or teen is, and it might contact information. If there’s no way of knowing who your child is, or how to contact them on or off-line., they can use photos. Otherwise, think about what information it contains. Could you find your child off-line. by using the information they supply? Think really hard about this. Sometimes we give out clues that, when pieced together, can lead to us. (Don’t worry. I’ll share information about this later on in Chapter 7, in “Clues We Five Away-Shannon, Now Known as “Tiffany.”)

Do you know what information is really out there that can be pieced together? Here’s how you can find out.

Hello, Information? I’d Like to Know What Information You Have About My Child

There are several directory web sites that contain e-mail addresses and, in some cases, home addresses and phone numbers. These are called “white pages.” They get their information from public telephone directories, voluntary listings (when people register this information directly with the site), and search spiders. If your kids want to be found, they register their e-mail or home address with these sites.

Some of the free e-mail services also have a members’ directory, but the contact information may not be as complete as that with a search directory. The ICQ and instant messaging directories can be surprisingly dangerous, since the include lots of information your child might not even realize is made public.

While your kids may be careful about sharing off-line. personal information, there are ways information is used to help get more information about a person online. For example, if your child has a listed phone number, their address is probably listed in an online White Pages directory. Sometimes, if they registered at one of the directory sites, their e-mail address is linked to their off-line. contact info, including their phone number.

There are several web sites that provide reverse telephone number searches (www.anywho.com)

<<http://www.anywho.com>>, www.switchboard.com <<http://www.switchboard.com>>, and www.infospace.com <<http://www.infospace.com>>). Just type in the telephone number, and up comes the person's name and address, with handy links to search for e-mail information and a map to their home. If you have an unlisted number it is less likely that your information will appear.

There are reverse e-mail searches, too, such as www.bigfoot.com <<http://www.bigfoot.com>>, and www.iaf.net <<http://www.iaf.net>>. There you can put in someone's e-mail address and it gives you other information about them. (We searched for mine, but nothing came up, so this might not be a serious problem yet, since there are hundreds of web sites that contain my e-mail address and off-line business contact information.) Still, it's a good idea to check them all out. One site allows you to search several databases at the same time, www.theultimates.com/white/. It might be a good place to start.

What Can You Do About It?

You can check and see if your child is listed anywhere and remove the information if they are.

Here are a few other web site search locations you should check:

Finding people: www.1800ussearch.com <<http://www.1800ussearch.com>>

Looking up people and businesses: www.databbaseamerica.com <<http://www.databbaseamerica.com>>

National Telephone Book-White Page: [www.yahoo.com/](http://www.yahoo.com/search/people) <<http://www.yahoo.com/>>search/people

Also, if your child has ICQ, check their directories and profiles: www.icq.com <<http://www.icq.com>>.

If they use AOL's instant messenger, or another instant messaging service, or any free e-mail service, check their member directories. And if your ISP or online service offers member directories or profiles, search for your child, using their screen name or your or their e-mail addresses. You might want to enlist your children's help-if you think they won't add themselves to these site directories when you're not looking.

Last but not least, you should search for your child's name at the major search engines by putting their whole name in quotes. (For example, "Parry Aftab" will search for me, as opposed to every "Parry" and every "Aftab" mentioned that might appear separately in the search engine.) And if someone is posting about them, or they are using their real names in newsgroups, you can also search Deja News (www.dejanews.com <<http://www.dejanews.com>>) for their name, also using the same "quotes search format

The Wild Wild West: IRC, FTP, Usenet, and Newsgroup

Some parts of the Internet are more free-for-all than others. IRC, FTP, and Usenet are three of those.

Usenet is a worldwide collection of newsgroups. A newsgroup is a discussion group devoted to a particular topic. They aren't located on the Web. They are a separate and much older part of the Internet, without graphics, sound, or animation (other than the lively discussion of newsgroup members).

The newsgroups collect articles, discussions, and other messages on a particular subject, then broadcast them or make available to users over the Internet. Some newsgroups are moderated, which means the material is screened by a moderator before being posted. Many are not.

As the Web develops, Usenet and newsgroups are becoming less prominent. But with so many die-hard Usenet fans out there, they're unlikely to disappear anytime soon. They can still be a great way to reach people who are interested in the same things that you are, and teenagers may sometimes find newsgroups a good source of arcane information about certain topics for reports. Finding a newsgroup is as simple as searching www.dejanews.com <<http://www.dejanews.com>>, the main newsgroup index. And posting is as simple as following the Deja News instructions.

But newsgroup participants are well known for their opinionated discussions, and flaming often abounds.

(Flaming is when someone insults, annoys, provokes, or attacks someone else online.) Although there are many great newspapers, especially for special parenting needs (try "misc.kids), there are many more where chaos and outrageous behavior rule. There are even a few that trade in illegal materials, such as child pornography.

IRC is a non-Web chat area, where thousands of channels, on thousands of topics, give people a place to chat. On IRC they can usually chat without the strict terms of service codes of conduct set by the chat giants, like AOL and Talk City. That means the same unrestricted Wild West atmosphere exists in the IRC as in the newsgroups, but live. Many pedophile groups use IRC as their chat area of choice. To ensure privacy from prying eyes of parents and undercover FBI agents, chats by invitation only can be setup.

FTP (file transfer protocol) is a method of accessing files located on computers that are connected to the Internet. They are most often used to access game files, but sometimes these computers also house serious hate, pedophilia, and child pornography materials.

Newsgroups, FTP, and IRC are good examples of how an area of the Internet can be both rich with valuable information and lively discussion and full of serious dangers for our children.

What Can You Do About It?

Just remember that given the Wild West atmosphere of many IRC and newsgroup discussions, your children should be carefully supervised when using any of them-or kept off them entirely until they're old enough to look out for themselves. They should also be warned to know the Netiquette and IRC channel or newsgroup rules before venturing forth into any IRC channels or newsgroup. Failure to adhere to the rules can result in serious flaming and harassment of the offender and being "kicked" (thrown off the chat channel for a while) or "banned" (thrown off forever).

You will be relieved to learn that it's not as hard to keep a child away from newsgroups as it is to keep them away from certain web sites Unless children are looking for graphic information on just about any offensive topic, the newsgroups don't hold much interest for a child. (No sound, graphics, or animations, remember?) So finding safe and interesting sites on the Web, and warning them to stay away from newsgroups, might be enough.

And since many child-friendly chat areas are easier to use and often are more fun than IRC chats, children may not mind staying off IRC altogether.

Talk to them about FTP sites they access and what they are downloading. Make sure that they are staying away from the dangerous ones and are using antivirus programs.

For those of you who want to filter access to IRC, FTP, and newsgroups, many of the products on the market filter them, as well as the Web. Some can block access to them entirely.