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## Teens warned MySpace.com may pose risks

Stranger dangers: Posting personal data on Web sites can attract predators, authorities say

**By Sheena McFarland**  
**The Salt Lake Tribune**  
**Salt Lake Tribune**

Lindsay Waters isn't as open as she used to be.

The 17-year-old used to lay out all of her personal information on the popular social networking Web site MySpace.com.

But after her parents learned some of the potential dangers the site presents, the Centerville teen now shares only her first name and the fact that she likes to play softball and hang out with friends.

She also blocked her site so only friends she approves can link to her page.

"When I first got my account, people added me and I never deleted them. Some people will still e-mail me, but I'll only respond if they are local and not old or anything," Waters said.

While Chris Ahearn would rather hear that Waters no longer uses MySpace.com, he is happy to know that she and other teens are using better judgment.

Ahearn, the section chief of the state Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, says more parents and children need to be aware of the potential dangers of using sites such as MySpace.com.

"You never know who's on the other end of Internet contact, and that's something kids don't seem to appreciate," Ahearn said.

MySpace presents an opportunity for users to describe themselves in great detail using personal profiles, blogs, photos and internal chats. Problems arise when adults with criminal motives use the information to find and meet teenagers.

The Web site has caught the attention of Ahearn's task force because the site, which originally formed to allow bands to communicate with their fans and other music groups, recently has exploded into mainstream teen culture. It remains one of the most trafficked sites on the Web.

Ahearn says parents need to realize how severe the consequences of using the site can be.

He knows of one current rape investigation that occurred after two people who met online later got together in real life.

Ahearn says even parents who monitor their children's online activity should ban use of sites such as MySpace because children can access such sites on any computer, not just those at home.

"It's like trying to play Russian roulette safely," he said. "There's just not a safe way to do it."

Schools understand that and are taking steps to protect students.

Districts throughout the state have banned access to sites such as MySpace.com at their schools, said Mike Kelley, Jordan School District spokesman.

Every public school student must sign an agreement that defines which Web sites are appropriate to visit. Any student who reneges on the agreement is prohibited from using the Internet at school.

The Utah Attorney General's Office and the Utah State Office of Education also collaborated on an Internet safety curriculum being integrated into schools, AG spokesman Paul Murphy said. It features a Web site at <http://www.netsmartz.org> that includes games, quizzes and activities that teach students about the dangers of the Internet.

At Judge Memorial Catholic High School in Salt Lake City, students can't access any chat site.

Dean of students Taryn Horner said she knew it wasn't her place to tell students they can't have a MySpace page, but she wanted to ensure her students had information about the potential dangers of the site.

She taped a "Dateline NBC" show about MySpace.com and showed it to every Judge freshman earlier this month.

She also assigned an essay about who could be looking at MySpace.com pages and had the students use the Utah Sex Offender Registry to find anyone on the list who lived near their homes.

"A lot of these kids didn't realize how much personal information they were posting and what that could lead to," Horner said. "Many kids told me they were grateful that I told them about it because many of them didn't realize it was dangerous."

Students nationwide on occasion have used the site to publicly belittle their teachers, fellow students and parents.

Horner didn't encounter that at Judge Memorial, but she was concerned about how some students were portraying the school.

Some profiles that listed Judge Memorial as their school included references to drug paraphernalia and made derogatory comments about the school.

"I explained to students what it means to be a part of something bigger like a school community and how that was reflecting on the school," Horner said.

Some teenagers caution against becoming overly alarmed.

Winter Powers, of Draper, says she uses MySpace simply to chat with friends.

Powers hops on every day after school, but she makes sure anyone she talks to is at least the friend of one of her real-life friends, and she never responds to random chatters.

"No one really ever told me not to talk to anyone weird, it's just something that I learned myself," Powers said. "It's common sense, really."

**smcfarland@sltrib.com**

## Safety on the Internet

\* The Internet is not a safe place for children and teenagers to meet someone for the first time. Don't do it.

\* Don't give out any personal information on the Internet. Even small pieces of personal information can be put into a search engine and traced back to an address or phone number.

\* For younger children, the Web site <http://www.netsmartz.org> offers games, activities and quizzes parents and teachers can use to teach the potential dangers of the Internet.

*Source: Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force*