

# Parents' and educators' new concern: Keeping kids safe online

————— *Twenty-eighth in a series.* —————

A generation ago, parents worried about their children “getting in with the wrong crowd.” Today, they worry “the wrong crowd” is being invited into their children’s homes through the Internet.

To combat the pervasive and sometimes dangerous impact of the Internet on today’s youths, educators across the country are being trained in schools and diocesan programs about how to keep students safe while they are online.

Holy Names Sister Daleen Larkin, principal of St. Andrew School in Pasadena, has discussed, with parents and students, the dangers of the Internet, especially problems linked to putting personal information on social networking Web sites like [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com) where users post online journals, photos, and thoughts and interests to share with others.

“There are huge issues in front of us because of technology which no generation has ever faced before,” said Sister Larkin. “Kids are really vulnerable.”

As Los Angeles County Sheriff Lieutenant Rocky Costa, project director of the Southern California High Tech Task Force, explained in a Dec. 19, 2005 Los Angeles Times article: “The biggest group using myspace is 13-25...but they’re not the only folks in there. Police are accessing it, parents are accessing it, so are the predators and pedophiles. We’re all there.”

Myspace.com, which has more than 60 million members, announced this spring that it has hired someone to oversee safety, education, privacy and law enforcement affairs. In March, the FBI arrested two men in connection with separate sexual molestation charges involving two girls, ages 11 and 14, whom they allegedly met through the site.

The site forbids minors 14 and younger from joining, but children can lie about their ages to get around the restrictions.

The St. Andrew School policy is that students cannot have myspace personal profiles. Sister Larkin and her staff inform parents if their child, usually a seventh or eighth grader, has created a myspace account and require that it be terminated.

“We want to be providing a safe environment for children,” said Sister Larkin. “Children don’t have the experience or the wisdom to know when they shouldn’t be someplace.”

Some archdiocesan students have posted photos taken at school without permission. The archdiocesan legal department has created letters for school principals to use that require myspace and other social networking sites

to remove the unauthorized use of school photographs, school brochures and even exams.

Sister Larkin first became interested in the issue when students started spending too much time at home chatting on the Internet and were not doing their homework. Myspace use was interfering with student academic performance.

“Education is the key to their future,” said Sister Larkin, adding she doesn’t want web chatting to compromise her students’ futures.

Catholic high schools, said the principal, are also starting to look at student internet use in their admissions process. Employers may also check students’ web profiles.

“What’s out on the web is public. It could come back to haunt someone,” said Sister Larkin, who lamented the many times gossip, slander and foul language is used on these sites. “These are teachable moments. We need to teach children to make their own decisions that are healthy, safe and moral.”

Parish Safeguard the Children committees are beginning to talk to parishioners about responsible Internet use, said Joan Vienna, director of the Office of Safeguard the Children.

“Parent education is half the battle,” said Vienna. “Parents need to be responsible and savvy. Sometimes they don’t have the knowledge they need. They don’t understand what’s happening.”

Here are pro-active measures parents can take to keep children safe:

- Become educated on what the internet offers.
- Eliminate personal e-mail accounts for elementary and middle school children, and let them instead use the family e-mail address to talk with relatives and approved friends. Allow personal e-mail accounts only for high school or college-age youth living at home.
- Place passwords on all computers and change the passwords frequently.
- Make sure the family computer has firewalls and software to restrict sites children can visit on the computer. Software such as Spectorsoft records and reports what is said and posted online. Information about internet filtering and monitoring software is available at [Software4parents.com](http://Software4parents.com).
- Set the computer in a room where it is in plain sight of all adults.
- Teach children how to report and deal with intrusive e-mails and telephone calls.

*Catholic News Service contributed to this article.*