

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

ONE ASHBURTON PLACE
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02108-1598

THOMAS F. REILLY
ATTORNEY GENERAL

(617) 727-2200
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September, 2006

Dear Parents and Guardians:

The Internet is one of the greatest inventions of our time. It expands the walls of our classrooms, and allows students to communicate with friends, do research and get help with homework. But with all the good it brings, the Internet can also expose children to inappropriate material, and even people who may do them harm.

Most young people use Internet technology, like e-mail, Instant Messaging, social networking websites, and text messaging to legitimately communicate with friends and share important information. But too often we see incidents where cyberbullies misuse these technologies to victimize others.

We are also aware of the Internet crimes against children that have grabbed headlines in the media. Sometimes suspects and victims have met each other online through social networking sites, those increasingly popular sites where our children, especially young teens, meet other people, communicate, and exchange information. Unfortunately, these sites have also become a virtual playground for criminals and potential child predators to hide out and communicate anonymously with potential victims.

We realize that the best way to prevent Internet crimes, particularly those against children, is to educate parents and kids about the Internet. Enclosed with this letter are two advisories designed to provide you with this important information. We invite you to help us promote the safe and responsible use of the Internet by talking with your children about how they can protect themselves and respect others online. For more information, parents can also visit the Attorney General's website at www.ago.state.ma.us.

We hope you will join us in this effort to protect children from Internet crimes and bullying.

Sincerely,

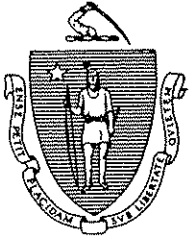
Thomas F. Reilly
Attorney General

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "John A. King", written over a white background.

Superintendent of Schools





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**AG REILLY WARNS PARENTS ABOUT THE
POTENTIAL DANGERS OF CHILDREN USING
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES SUCH AS
MYSPACE AND XANGA**

Recent incidents involving Internet crimes against children have been prominent in the media. In some incidents, these crimes involved suspects and victims who met each other online through social networking sites. Online social networking sites have become increasingly popular with children, especially young teens, as a place where they can meet other people, communicate, and exchange information. Unfortunately, these sites have also become a "virtual playground" for criminals and potential child predators to communicate anonymously with and prey upon potential victims.

How do social networking sites work?

Any computer with Internet access can be used to join a social networking site. Some sites require only that the registrant provide an email address and often there is no system in place to verify the validity of any of the information that a registrant provides during the registration process. Most sites require that users abide by terms of use meant to curb improper conduct, but enforcement of these terms of use is limited and often relies on users to report violations.

Once a registrant becomes a member he or she can post personal information, images or other information depending upon the features available at the site. Unless the site offers privacy settings for the disclosure of certain information and the user chooses to activate these settings, all the information the user posts on the site may be visible to all other users of the site.

There are many social networking sites, including:

Facebook.com
Friendsfusion.com
Friendster.com
Intellectconnect.com
Livejournal.com
Myspace.com
Tagworld.com
Xanga.com



What are the potential dangers associated with social networking sites?

Luring/Enticement – Internet sexual predators and known sex offenders have used social networking sites to locate and communicate with potential victims.

Identity Theft – Criminals may steal the identities of users who post personal information.

Bogus or False Profiles – Individuals may create false profiles in order to remain anonymous in their communications, or may even copy personal information and photographs from a child's profile and use the information and photographs to create a bogus profile depicting the child in an inappropriate manner.

Cyberbullying/Harassment – Individuals may post derogatory, hurtful, or threatening information about others.

Stalking – Stalkers can use personal information posted to the sites to locate and pursue victims.

Fraud Schemes – Criminals who wish to defraud others of money or property can locate victims, gain their trust, and then take advantage of that trust for criminal purposes.

Inappropriate Sexual or Violent Content – Some users post sexually explicit or violent content that is inappropriate for young computer users.

The DOs and DON'Ts of Online Social Networking:

AG Reilly advises parents to take the following steps to protect your children from those who misuse social networking sites.

DOs

- Explain to your child that the Internet is public and that anyone may gain access to information that he or she posts on it.
- Discuss Internet risks with your child and set clear expectations about the steps that he or she will take to stay safe online.
- Engage your child in frequent discussions about how he or she uses the Internet and his or her online experiences.
- Remind your child that visitors to social networking sites often disguise their identity.
- View any page your child has set up on a social networking site to make certain that its content does not compromise your child's safety or the safety of others.
- Enable computer Internet filtering features if they are available from your Internet service.
- Know your children's passwords, screen names, and account information.
- Put the computer in a family area of the household and do not permit private use.
- Report all inappropriate, non-criminal behavior to the site through its reporting procedures.

DON'Ts

- Post personal images, including photographs of themselves, their friends, or their family.
- Post their name or address.
- Post their age or date of birth.
- Post the name of their school, the names of their teams, or their grade level.
- Post their calendar of upcoming events or any information about their future whereabouts.

If your child receives sexually explicit materials or communications over the Internet, you should report it to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipLine (www.cybertipline.com) or calling 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).

You may also obtain additional information regarding Internet safety at the website of the Office of Massachusetts Attorney General Tom Reilly at www.ago.state.ma.us, and clicking the "Publications" button on the right hand side of the homepage and reviewing the "Consumer" publications, or by visiting the NCMEC Netsmartz Workshop at <http://www.netsmartz.org>.

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ATTORNEY GENERAL TOM REILLY OFFERS TIPS TO AVOID CYBERBULLYING

Schools and students across Massachusetts are reporting that more and more young people are engaged in or are the victims of cyberbullying online. Here are some tips from Attorney General Tom Reilly's Children, Youth and Communities Division to help identify, prevent and deal with cyberbullying.

What is cyberbullying?

- Sending hateful, derogatory, harassing or threatening messages to others
- Spreading rumors
- Sending personal or embarrassing information about or pictures of others - all with the intention of intimidating, frightening, ridiculing, or harming someone else.

Just as young people legitimately use e-mail, Instant Messaging, websites, blogs, and text messaging to communicate with friends and share important information, cyberbullies misuse these technologies in an attempt to victimize others.

What is the impact of cyberbullying?

Bullying of any kind can be deeply hurtful to young people. Technology now allows bullies to reach beyond the classroom, school bus, playground, or immediate neighborhood to victimize another child before an entire online community. Bullies can reach their target via computer in his or her own home or bedroom, giving the impression that there is no escape from the bully's reach. Youth who feel threatened by the pervasive and invasive bullying can lash out at the bully or others in retaliation, or turn inward and blame himself or herself for the bully's abuse.

What can adults do about cyberbullying?

- Communicate a clear set of expectations regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior on the Internet to your child.
- Unacceptable behavior includes: revealing your password or the passwords of others; sending e-mail messages, Instant Messages or text messages to others disguising yourself as another person; spreading rumors or false information about others; sending rude, harassing or threatening e-mail messages, Instant Messages or text messages; creating websites that ridicule, humiliate, or intimidate others; and posting on websites or disseminating embarrassing or inappropriate pictures or images of others.
- If your child engages in unacceptable behavior online, make certain that there are immediate consequences to his or her activities.



- Advise your child that cyberbullying may be a criminal offense. Electronically communicated threats and willfully and maliciously directing electronic communications at a specific person that seriously alarm that person and would cause a reasonable person to suffer emotional distress are crimes.
- Tell your child to never reveal his or her password to anyone, including friends, and explain that people can use his or her password to engage in inappropriate Internet activity.
- Keep the computer in a well traveled area of your home to discourage unacceptable behavior.
- Talk to your child regularly about his or her online activities and experiences, as well as the activities of others he or she may communicate with online.
- Review your child's buddy list on a regular basis and ask questions to make certain he or she is communicating only with people he or she actually knows.
- If your child is the victim of bullying by school peers, report the bullying to your child's school and ask the school to address the behavior and protect your child.
- If you believe that your child's safety is in danger, immediately contact your local police department. You should also contact your local police department about the cyberbullying if:
 - Your child has received child pornography.
 - Your child has been sexually solicited or received sexually explicit images from someone who knows or should know your child is a minor.
 - Your child or anyone in the household has been threatened.

What are the warning signs that my child may either be a cyberbully or the victim of a cyberbully?

It is normal for children, especially teenagers, to place a high value on their privacy. On the other hand, unusually covert or suddenly withdrawn behavior may be an indicator that your child is engaged in or is the victim of cyberbullying. Other potential warning signs include:

- Your child has withdrawn from normal interaction with family and friends to spend an inordinate amount of time engaged in Internet activity.
- Your child turns the computer off or quickly changes the monitor's screen when you enter the room.
- Your child suddenly avoids using the computer or drastically changes Internet use habits.
- Your child demonstrates a marked change in behavior, beliefs, self-esteem or attitudes.
- Your child's academic performance or school attendance decreases significantly.

If you are concerned that your child's online activities or experiences are adversely affecting his or her mental, physical, or social development, seek professional assistance. School guidance counselors or your child's pediatrician may be useful sources of help.

Where can I find more information about cyberbullying and Internet safety?

- **The Internet, Your Child, and You: What Every Parent Should Know**, Office of Attorney General Tom Reilly, www.ago.state.ma.us/filelibrary/intsafe.pdf
- **Internet Safety: Advice from Kids Who Have Faced Danger Online**, Office of Attorney General Tom Reilly, www.ago.state.ma.us/filelibrary/intrnet2.pdf
- **Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use**
cyberbully.org/docs/cbparents1.pdf
- **NetSmartz**, www.netsmartz.com
- **Stand Up and Stop Bullying: McGruff's Millstein Child Safety Center for Grownups**, www.mcgruff.org/grownups/cyberbullying.htm
- **Connect for Kids**, www.connectforkids.org/node/3116?tn=hp1
- **WiredSafety.org**, www.wiredsafety.org
- **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**, www.ncmec.org

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