

Family Matters 25, 2007-08
Take Control of the Dangers of the Internet

Parents, do you know where your children are?

Of course you do. They're right in the next room playing on the computer. And we're a sophisticated, informed population. We know what's on the Internet. We've blocked the nasty stuff. We have common-sense rules. We know they're only on "private" spaces. They're only interacting with their "friends." They're playing kids' games. Right?

On Tuesday night, Special Agent Szatkowski showed us the real and terrifying playgrounds our kids inhabit. And we clearly weren't ready for this shocking field trip. What we saw in the playground called social networking was sickening.

We teach our children not to open the door to strangers –while right in the next room they are inviting the scariest strangers of all right into the private spaces of our homes. Social networking sites, chat rooms, and interactive gaming sites make them ready prey for an exploding world of predators. And they don't resist, because the object of their game is to collect "friends." Our children are smart. They're good kids. They are savvy. But society glorifies the sexualization of children, disabling their radar to suspicious behavior. Besides, they love hearing the compliments. And they're *curious*. Our students are not immune. They *are* exploring these dangerous alleyways that offer a panoply of good and evil in one jumbled, confusing mess. And because they're kids, they think they're invincible.

We can't afford to bury our heads in the sand.

Even by the morally bankrupt standards of *My Space*, the minimum age for networking is 14. But three-fourths of St. Robert 5th graders (nine- and ten- year-olds) claim to have profile pages. And a recent survey by a St. Robert parent found in excess of 300 *You Tube* videos attributed to St. Robert middle school students...that he knew.

I can never hope to communicate the magnitude of the danger, but hope you will trust my appraisal of the bottom line. A child with an online profile is not safe. Ever. A child in a chat room or IM environment (including superficially child-friendly gaming sites) is highly vulnerable to predators. And innocence lost is not retrievable.

The truth can be momentarily immobilizing. But then we remember that we need to name our enemies before we can overpower them. We *can* take control of the real and dangerous world of the Internet.

The parents in attendance at Tuesday night's program were moved to action. I am hopeful that their enlightenment will help us work together to protect all St. Robert students. It's time to rally our forces and build a new and better playground for our kids. It's time to pull the plug on social networking.

