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Play it safe when creating personal Web sites

**By Sharon Omahen
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Communicating through social networking Web sites like MySpace is the newest teenage rage. Despite its popularity, this new technology is fraught with potential dangers.

"If a parent allows their child to have a personal page on Web sites like MySpace, they should stay aware of what they're posting and who they're talking to," said Cheryl Varnadoe, a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension 4-H and youth development specialist.

When building content for their Web page, teenagers should make every effort to remain as anonymous as possible, she said.

"Avoid posting anything that could enable a stranger to locate you," Varnadoe said. "This includes your last name, the name of your school, sports teams, the town you live in and places you hang out."

Remember this, too, when posting photographs to your Web site.

Be sure items in your photographs don't reveal your school name or your location, she said.

"Look at the background of your photos to make sure you aren't accidentally giving out identifying information," Varnadoe said. "The name of a mall, the license plate on your parents' car or your team jersey all contain information that can reveal your location."

Teenagers should also remember that information posted to a Web site can be downloaded or reposted to another Web site.

"Before you upload a photograph, ask yourself how you'd feel if your parents, grandparents, teachers or future boss saw the photo," she said.

If your personal Web site contains a comment section, check and monitor the content often.

"Don't respond to mean or embarrassing comments," Varnadoe said. "Delete them. And, if possible, block offensive people from commenting further."

Inappropriate comments should also be reported to the networking site's administrator.

"The best rule of thumb is not to say anything online that you would not say offline," she said.

If the Web site offers this fea-

ture, create a "friends" list to control who can and cannot post comments to your site. Only allow people you know and trust to be on your list.

"If you don't use privacy features, anyone can see your info," Varnadoe said. "This includes people with bad intentions."

Don't plan to meet someone in person that you meet over the Internet unless you are certain of their actual identity, she said.

"It's still not risk-free," she said. "But take along some friends if you do plan a meeting. And make sure you meet in a public place."

For this, and other reasons, teenagers should not sign up for membership to Web sites designed for adults.

"Be honest about your age," Varnadoe said. "If you are too young to sign up on a site, don't lie about your age. Talk with your parents about alternative Web sites that may be more age-appropriate for you."

(Sharon Omahen is a news editor with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)