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Internet Safety

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Protecting Our Teens Online: Think Twice Before You Post

A 2004 national study conducted by i-SAFE, a leader in internet safety education, found that a majority of teens feel freer, safer and more positive about themselves online than they do in the "real" world. The study may suggest that teens create their own identities online that they believe are disconnected from what they do in the physical world. Teens do not fully understand that what they do online can have real world consequences for them at school and in the community.

The most risky online behavior that teens engage in is that of posting personal information like name, address, school names and mascots, favorite weekend activities, photos, and more. Posting personal information puts teens at risk in two ways. First, online predators groom their victims by first learning as much personal information about them as possible. Internet predators use that personal information to gain the trust of teens, lure them into close online relationships, and, ultimately, secure a face-to-face meeting with them. Second, the more personal information a teen posts online the higher the risk that their online image may be a negative one. A teen with a negative online image could experience many harmful ramifications.

Over three-quarters of all middle and high school students report that they have social networking online profile like that of Facebook or MySpace. On these sites teens post photos and videos of themselves, share artistic creations, and blog or journal. Who might be looking at a teen's online profile? Try a principal, a college admissions advisor, an employer, a police officer, a future significant other, and an internet predator. College admissions officials often check to see what online information they can find on candidates. The same applies to employers that teens are eager to work for now and in their future. Teachers, law enforcement officers, politicians, and many other public officials will have their digital footprint scrutinized before they are ever hired. A 'digital footprint' is an individual's personal information that remains in the cyberworld even after the creator has removed it. Nearly all information that is posted online is impossible to control or remove indefinitely.

It is the responsibility of parents and educators to help prepare and protect teens by working with them to build their online-decision making skills. Parents can do this by first talking with teens about the expectations for their online conduct. Make sure that teens understand that the life they live in the cyberworld is the same life they are responsible for the physical world. Moreover, discuss with teens the implications that exist when a teen has a negative online image and be sure they understand that they are already creating their 'digital footprint' that will be with them for a lifetime. Teens are in the drivers' seat: they control their online image by monitoring what personal information they post about themselves. Ultimately, remind teens that when it comes to personal information ***think twice before you post.***"

Developed by Annie J. Lisowski, 4-H & Youth Development Educator, Buffalo County UW-Extension, November 2009.