



## USEP-OHIO PARENT TIP: Safety in Cyberland

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Seventeen year old Lorrie suddenly became more reserved and stayed to herself at school. She had many friends who she no longer seemed to connect with in school or outside. She dropped out of volleyball, quit the school singers and seemed to have little enthusiasm for the events as a high school junior. She became sullen and withdrawn with the family and wanted to leave her school for senior year, missing all of the activities she had looked forward to. When mom and dad tried to understand what was going on, she simply said, “The girls in my class are snobs and I don’t want to be like them. I just want to leave and go into the college program at the community college where I can earn both high school and college credit at the same time.” And so they helped her to do this. She missed all of those special activities as a senior and had a disappointing and lonely time for the next year and a half, even a time when she hid dealing with bulimia. She became anxious and depressed, and finally admitted her problems when college became a drag and a disappointment. What had actually started this slide into depression? Simple cyber bullying! Lorrie’s Facebook page loaded with some photos and information became a target for two classmates who created lies and information that embarrassed and crushed Lorrie’s spirit. It was two years before school staff or her parents learned the complexities of the situation and could look at the history of her depression. This story has a good ending, unlike some we see in the news today. Lorrie is in counseling, working and going to school. She realizes how the bullying hurt and stymied her progress as a sensitive adolescent with acne and weight problems that kept her feeling alone. She is a good student, and has renewed some of the connections with friends from the past who probably could have supported her if they had realized how hurt she became.

We teach kids important safety lessons like crossing the street, buckling up and hand washing. It scares me to know that my grandchildren face dangers as they socialize on the internet. Kimberly Mason, Ph.D., of Cleveland State University, says parents need to give kids a heads up! Your safety is at stake. By providing information about yourself and using blogs, chat rooms, email and instant messaging you can increase your exposure to people with unfriendly intentions.

The Federal Trade Commission is urging kids to add this lesson from their parents and teachers. The internet allows many more people to see your information than you might intend, including your parents, teachers, employer, the police—and strangers, who could be dangerous!

- Think about different sites before deciding to join a site – some allow *everyone* to view.
- Think about keeping some control over the information you post. You could restrict access to your page to a select group people like friends, your team or your family.
- Keep your information to yourself. Don’t post your full name, Social Security number, address, phone or bank information, and don’t post other people’s information either. Be cautious about posting info that could identify or locate you like school name, team, club.
- Make sure your screen name doesn’t say too much about you. Don’t use your name, age or hometown. It doesn’t take a genius to combine clues about who and where you are.
- Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing-and knowing-about you. Future employers or the college you might wish to apply to in the future may read.

- Remember that once you post information online, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.
- Consider NOT posting your photo. It can be altered and broadcast in scary ways!
- Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you are dealing with.
- Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. Ask your parent or a responsible adult to help you check out the person and go along to meet in a public place.
- Trust your gut if you have suspicions. If you feel threatened or uncomfortable because of someone or something online, tell an adult you trust, report to the police and the social networking site. *You could save someone else from becoming a victim!*

While sites can increase your circle of friends, they can also allow you or your family to be stalked online or off, to have your identity stolen or your computer hacked. Tell your children!

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