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“Overheard around the “water-cooler” INTERNET”?

Youth culture is changing and emerging with the technologies of the world, and we need to keep up if we are to continue to make a difference. Recently, after spending time with several young men and listening to their conversations throughout the day, I was surprised to hear how the conversation revolved around the internet. Many times they would mention a classmate whom they did not talk to much. Instead they referred to that person's “Facebook” or “MySpace” page. “Did you read that “Jimmy” is going to “Suzie’s” graduation party even though they broke up?”

Traditionally, in ministry we would need to take a young person out many times and build trust before we could find out what they think and get to their deepest issues. Today, with the creation of networking sites, young people are bearing their souls to the whole world. I recently sat down with a young man after looking at his page, and I was able to deal with some deep-seated issues that were brought in the open on “My Space” through his choice of music, pictures, and writings. What would have taken a long time was expedited, because he was willing to share so much with the world beforehand.

This summer, our staff are spending time with kids in an effort to get to know them and share the love of Christ with them. Rafting trips, cabin overnights, camps and the good old sit down “over a coke” are still as important as ever for our ministry at YFC. Summer is such a rich time for ministry and we are so thankful for the opportunity to spend time with kids.

Thank you for your generosity that puts our staff in front of kids every day-- kids like “Will”. Will said he felt really lonely, had no one to talk to, and was feeling “pretty” depressed before one of our staff people took him out to dinner. He said, “Thank You, I really needed that,” as he went in the house. What an honor it is to be able to carry out God’s work here on earth, and thank you for making that possible.

The following is an article to help understand the power and resource of networking sites

Jen is eighteen years old. I’ve known her since she and my daughter were Kindergarten classmates. While she and my daughter aren’t close friends, I still get to see and say “hello” to Jen at school events from time to time. If you were to ask me about Jen, I’d tell you that she’s a sweet, intelligent, and well-behaved kid who’s always smiling and doesn’t seem to have a care in the world. Appearances - even of those you think you know well - can be deceiving.

While surfing the internet one afternoon I stumbled upon something that forced me to see Jen* in a new light. I realized she wasn't the happy-go-lucky carefree kid that I thought she was. I found Jen's personal profile on the front page of her Xanga.com website to be especially alarming: you kill me - that's why I call you my "suicide" - if u hold me too tight. . . i'll only push you away>>. i need a lover that I don't have to love - i'm addicted to lust at first site and a few phone calls - i love boy and girls - especially my female crushes - girl on girl, who would have thought it could be so good!!! - road trips and concerts help me to complete my life - the bottle is my best friend and at times my worst enemy - it's true>> eat drink and be merry because tomorrow or the next day you may die - nice life. Maybe I don't know Jen that well after all.

Jen is one of the millions of teenagers who are choosing to expose themselves, their feelings, and their thoughts in personal blogs (web logs) posted on one of the many online social-networking websites, including MySpace, DeviantArt, Blogger, Xanga, Friendster, and Facebook. A relatively new phenomenon that's rapidly grown in popularity since first appearing in 1999, public online diaries and journals have replaced the hidden and locked private diaries once popular among teenage girls. Today, both our teenage girls and their male peers are openly sharing their "secrets" for anyone in the world with internet access to see.

Today's teens are using personal blogs to vent and share online commentary about everything including family-life, school, politics, religion, sports, entertainment, romance, and any and every other mundane aspect of teenage life. In addition, they post pictures of themselves (usually lots of them!), artwork, and personality profiles. Self-expression is encouraged as kids set up elaborate personalized backgrounds and music soundtracks that visitors see and hear when they visit the site. They talk about a variety of topics including sex, drugs, alcohol, teachers, and each other. The sites are highly interactive. Kids visiting others' sites can leave comments, post their picture, etc. At times, the sites seem to serve as a "hook-up" service as kids expand their networks to include people they've never met.

These sites warrant parental attention as they offer us a wide open window into the world of the teenagers we know and love. Here are some suggestions for dealing with this growing phenomenon.

First, know what your kids are doing online. Ask them if they've got their own blog page and if you can see it. If that's not the approach you want to take, spending a little bit of time online can usually get you to their online home. I suggest you visit the homepage of Xanga.com or myspace.com as a place to get started. Register for free as user. Then, utilize the site's "search" capability to find your town or school. Once you find one site that's local, open it up and begin clicking on the links to other sites. You'll find yourself flying through a web of local kids' sites with familiar names and faces. Eventually, you should find what you're looking for.

Second, read carefully without over reacting. Like me, you will probably find some things on these sites that are surprising and alarming. Much of what you are reading is very real and important to them. While some of it might be marked by exaggeration and embellishment, most depicts what's going on in their lives. Look for clues that will help you discover their problems, challenges, concerns, and struggles. Remember, you're looking through a window into their world.

Third, carefully and prayerfully prepare your response. For some, your only concern might be the fact that they've posted personal information and photos that would make them an easy mark for internet predators. For others, the issues we've

uncovered are far more severe. Take the time to discuss what you've read with your kids. While they may feel you have violated their privacy, assure them that your concern is motivated solely by your love and care for them. Most importantly, be sure you've prepared yourself to bring the light of God's Word to bear on their issues and struggles.

It's been said that "what you don't know can't hurt you." If you believe that, don't waste your time visiting these online blogs. But if you believe that "what you don't know can hurt them," take the time to love your kids by looking more deeply into their lives through the window of their online musings.

Dr. Walt Mueller is the founder and President of the Center for Parent/ Youth Understanding. To learn more about today's youth culture, visit them on the web at www.cpyu.org.

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