

# Predators Among Us: Teens And Youth Workers Confront Internet

By Dean Nelson | November 1 2006

All Justin Berry was looking for were some friends online. At age 13, with an absent father and clueless mother, he signed up for a social networking site and, because the site was running a special promotion, received a camera to clip onto his computer screen. People throughout the world could look at him while they interacted with him on the Internet.

“Like many young teenagers, I hoped my webcam would improve my social life,” he said earlier this year in a testimony to a congressional committee on sexual exploitation of children through the Internet. “I didn’t have a lot of friends and I was very lonely. I hoped this webcam would help me meet other teenagers online, maybe even find a few girls my age. That never happened.

Within minutes of his appearing on one site, he received an instant message from an adult male. Others followed. They complimented him on his looks, asked him how his day was going. They seemed, to Justin, genuinely interested in him — a situation he was not used to. All of those who contacted him were, in reality, online predators.

Meeting strangers online is one of the benefits of the Internet, if you listen to advertisements from eHarmony, match.com and other social networking sites. But the downside is that, especially for teenagers who frequent sites like MySpace, those strangers can be deadly.

And while a recent study sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children ([www.missing-kids.com](http://www.missing-kids.com)) says many young people are wising up about their online behavior, a shocking 17 percent of youths age 10 to 17 report being solicited for sex online.

Justin is now 19, attending college and reportedly seeking to follow Christ. Both Justin and his attorney, Stephen Ryan, declined to talk with YouthWorker Journal because of

Justin’s pending testimony in criminal trials this fall against the predators, but his case illustrates the dangers of using social networking sites to develop friendships.

A few weeks after Justin set up his webcam, one of the men he corresponded with online told him that he would pay Justin \$50 if he took off his shirt in front of his camera. The man explained how Justin could set up a PayPal account so that he could be paid online.

“I was excited about the \$50 — an amount that struck me at the time as a huge sum of money,” Justin said in his testimony. “Taking off my shirt seemed harmless; I did it at the pool. The money arrived, and I took off my shirt. My viewers complimented me, and it felt good.”

More gifts arrived, along with more offers for money. And more explicit requests. One writer asked him to remove his pants. Then his underwear. Then a request to masturbate in front of the camera.

Eventually one of the men asked Justin if he would like to go into a Webhosting business with him as his director of sales and marketing. The man suggested that Justin attend a

computer certification camp. At age 13, with his mother’s consent, Justin traveled to Michigan from his home in central California for the additional training. The man picked Justin up at the camp one day and brought him to his house where the man molested Justin. He was repeatedly molested by the man and several other adult males.

With the help of the predators, Justin established a pornographic Web site and money poured in from those wanting to see him commit sexual acts. He began other self-destructive activities, including drug and alcohol abuse. In retrospect, he said, he realized he was not in control of his life — the predators were.

“Webcams and instant messaging give predators power over children,” he said at the hearing. “The predators become part of the child’s life. Whatever warnings the child may have heard about meeting strangers, these people are no longer strangers. They have every advantage. It is the standard seduction of child predators, multiplied on a geometric scale.”

**ANTI-SOCIAL NETWORKING**

Justin Berry's experience has been repeated throughout the country. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, at least one in five social network users have reported receiving unwanted sexual advances.

Dateline NBC's television series, "To Catch a Predator," worked with the organization perverted-justice.com and law enforcement agencies to show viewers how easy it was for young people to attract the attention of predators online. Using decoys posing as teenage boys and girls who were approached online by adults, the program set up homes for the predators to use for sex. Hidden cameras showed dozens of men from all walks of life arriving — usually with alcohol and condoms — only to be surprised by an NBC News reporter stepping out from the shadows instead of a child. Christians of various ages were well-represented among the men caught off guard.

## **A WORLDWIDE PROBLEM**

Earlier this year, a 16-year-old Michigan girl ran away from home with the intent to marry a 20-year-old man from Jordan that she met on her MySpace site. She was intercepted by the FBI in Tel Aviv and sent back home.

In Texas, a 14-year-old girl's family is suing MySpace for \$30 million, claiming that the site fails to protect minors from adult sexual predators. The girl agreed to meet a boy she met online who claimed he was a high school student. The boy turned out to be an adult who sexually assaulted her. The lawsuit includes news reports of other assaults that occurred after initial MySpace contacts, such as a Wisconsin man charged with six counts of assaulting a 14-year-old girl and a Connecticut man accused of sexually assaulting a 13-year-old girl.

MySpace.com, the most popular social networking site among teenagers, claims 100 million subscribers. It is the secondmost popular site in the United States, behind Yahoo!, and now has an agreement with Google so that those on MySpace don't have to leave the site to search for someone else. To create a site, a user must include a name, e-mail

address, gender, country, and age. Its account page says users must be 14 or older, but it does not verify the age of the user. None of the other information has to be true, either.

## **YOUTH WORKERS' DILEMMA**

And while online networking can result in potentially devastating abuses, it is the dominant computer activity of most teenagers, youth workers say.

"If I send a group e-mail announcing something, the kids won't respond for days," said Danny Moen, junior high pastor at Sun Grove Community Church near Sacramento, Calif. "But if I send it out through MySpace, the responses come in immediately."

Moen set up his own MySpace account because he knew MySpace was where the young people in his group were spending their time and discussing things with each other that they would never discuss in a youth group meeting.

"It's my missions tool," he said. "In a weird way MySpace is where the kids are baring their souls. I have had very serious discussions with kids in the youth group about drug use, self-image, and other personal issues that they would never say face to face with me. Those conversations are priceless. The reality is that MySpace is the world they're living in. That's their environment."

Youth workers who have MySpace sites use them for serious discussions and for making group announcements, but they also see them as a way to hold kids accountable for the photos the teenagers post and the things they say.

"What I see on the sites is the struggle to answer the two basic questions kids have always asked — Who am I? and Who do others want me to be?" said Keegan Lenker, youth pastor at Gateway Church of the Nazarene in Murrieta, Calif. The photos and autobiographical information reveal "a total lack of authenticity," he said. "So I feel free to call them on it."

Jim Manker, outreach pastor at the Sun Grove church with Moen, feels that the lack of authenticity in social networking sites is one of the activity's biggest detriments.

"It's a melting pot of fables, lies and temptation," he said. "Look at the girls' sites — they all say they're Christian, and here are pictures of them in their thongs and showing their cleavage. It's too easy to not be who you are, finding others who aren't who they are."

The popularity of the sites reveals something fundamental that is missing in our interaction with one another, Manker said.

"I think MySpace in particular is an illustration of how desperate we are for relationship and intimacy, and how terrible we are at authentic relationship," he said. "It's a substitute for doing the harder work of sitting across the table from one another."

Another concern is how easy it is to migrate from MySpace to pornography sites. MySpace accounts are punctuated by pop-up ads offering explicit chat rooms and revealing photos offering porn.

"You're really just a couple of clicks away from seeing topless girls," said Moen. "The temptation is there in your face."

Added Manker: "Kids say that it's a place to meet with their friends. But it's like deciding to meet them in your town's red-light district. Is that a good idea?"

## **FACE-TO-FACE DEFENSE**

Youth workers interviewed for this story agreed that the best defense against experiencing trouble with MySpace and other similar sites is parents, even though they agree that most parents don't know their children have accounts and would be shocked to see what is being posted for the world to see. They encourage parents to discuss the dangers with their teenagers, as well as to get their own accounts and search for their kids' and their friends' sites. Psychologists suggest that parents ask to see their children's sites, with 24-hour lead time to allow the kids to remove potentially problematic material.

"Most involved Christian parents don't allow their kids to have MySpace accounts," said Moen. "I even tell the kids in my group that I don't think they should have these sites. But I know that most of them do, so I can't simply ignore that."

Lenker believes that the comfort young people feel in hiding behind a computer screen instead of having face-to-face dialogue is a reflection of a lack of communication at home.

"Face-to-face encountering is important in all aspects of life," he said. "But many kids don't know how to do that because they've never seen it in their own homes."

Manker believes that the popularity of MySpace and other similar sites reveals a spiritual condition that has been with civilization from the beginning — that there is an aspect of

people's lives that would be uncomfortable if Jesus were present in it.

"How would those sites be different if Jesus was on your MySpace account?" Manker said. "And that's precisely the problem. It's not your space. You gave up your space. It's God's space."

## **Seeking a Safe Place on MySpace**

At one point, Jordyn Fulcher, 16, deleted her MySpace site. But she quickly put a new one together. "I realized I was addicted to it," she said, laughing. "I'm not really proud of that."

Jordyn estimates that she is on MySpace two or three times a day, which can take up to a few hours. It is the preferred way of communicating for her generation, she said.

"E-mail is what my parents use, because that's what all of their friends use," she said. "But MySpace is more convenient for people my age."

It's easy, Jordyn said, to avoid getting into trouble on this popular networking site.

"Occasionally I will get messages from people I don't know saying, 'Hi, I'm new here, looking for cool things to do,'" she said. "But you can just block them if you don't know

who they are, and they can't get on your site again."

As for the ads inviting visitors to inappropriate sites, "I just know not to go there," she said.

Still, she understands how people can let down their guard. "I can see why people would want to write back if a

message said, 'You're really pretty' on your site," she said. "MySpace can be a dangerous place if people are really stupid about it."

The advantages of using MySpace, so far, outweigh the disadvantages, for Jordyn. "It's better than using the phone, because I usually just want to leave messages," she said. "It's a way to keep in touch. It would be weird to call most people, because there's not enough to say to have a conversation."

It's also the fastest way to reach her friends. "If I can't find somebody, I know I can leave them a MySpace message and know they'll be checking it soon," she said.

And the downside? "It takes way too much of my time," she said.

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