Know What They'll See

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By Jenny Andreasson

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, are a sexual predator's dream come true, Winter Springs Police Captain Kevin Brunelle explained to parents at his July 8 Internet safety class.

During the two-hour class, he focused on what parents can do to protect their children online, and how to tell if their child is being stalked or bullied on the net.

As of July 2007, MySpace has booted more than 29,000 registered sex offenders from its site. In 2006, there were about 100 criminal incidents involving adults who used MySpace to prey or attempt to prey on children, he said.

But there are precautions parents and children can take to not become victims. "These sites are as dangerous as you allow them to be," Brunelle said.

For instance, parents can now prevent their child from ever creating a MySpace profile by submitting their child's e-mail address to the site. Parents can check if their child already has a profile by visiting MySpace.com/ParentCare.

But children can safely be online. Brunelle recommends keeping dialogue open about potential dangers, limiting the posting of personal information and time spent online, and looking at their e-mail accounts and profiles on a regular basis — which means knowing their children's screen names and passwords.

Some children, however, will create a second MySpace or Facebook profile called a "shadowing page," which shows no signs of inappropriate behavior. Their other profile will have the stuff they don't want their parents to see. So, to be sure, he recommends a type of Internet-monitoring software, such as Net Nanny.

Also, he said if the computer is kept in the kitchen or the living room and not a child's bedroom, they are less likely to get into trouble or be targeted by a predator. A predator who is grooming — or manipulating — a child will often ask where his computer is in the house. If it's in an area where parents are likely to be, the predator cuts off all contact with the child, he said.

Parents must also become familiar with "net lingo" in chat rooms. For example, POS means "parent over shoulder" — the youth is telling the person that she is chatting with not to type anything he wouldn't want

her parents to read. Similarly, PIR means "parent in room" and P911 "parent alert." <mark>Go to NetLingo.com for more definitions.</mark>

"The kids hate me for divulging these secrets," Brunelle said to the 10 parents in attendance. "I thank them for hating me. Of course, they're going to come up with new lingo now that you're becoming educated."

The presentation also contained information about how to take personal information off the Web. Brunelle advised the parents to type their names into a search engine such as Google. "You'll be amazed at what comes back on you," he said. Predators use information such as favorite music lists or for-sale postings to target children.

Winter Springs residents Jeff and Laurie Fortune attended the class to learn about Internet safety because they have five children, some of whom are approaching their teenage years. They were stunned by how much personal information can be dug up on the Web.

"The scary thing is you can't stop them," Jeff said.

Next Internet safety classes:
Aug. 5 and Aug. 19, each from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Winter Springs Police Station on Moss Road.