Popular Youth Web Sites Expose Teens, Tweens to Images of Violent Behavior, Substance Abuse

White House Drug Czar alerts parents to threat of online exposure, calls for stronger monitoring.

Washington, DC (PRWEB) October 9, 2008 -- The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) today released a startling data compilation indicating the extent to which Internet sites - particularly social networking sites that post user-generated content - can spread misinformation and facilitate dangerous behaviors among teens, tweens, and younger children. These behaviors can include drug and alcohol use, self-mutilation, extreme violence, and anorexia and other eating disorders. The study also shows that most parents are unaware of the nature and extent to which their children are exposed to or engaging in dangerous behaviors online.

A new Nielsen Online study, conducted on behalf of ONDCP during the month of June, measured the online viewing habits of teens, and tracked their exposure to drug-related content. The findings reveal that one in 20 teens who are viewing online videos watched one or more drug-related videos during a one-month period. The analysis found that more than a third of those viewing drug-related content are under the age of 16.

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"Parents read news stories about Internet pedophiles, and they understandably worry about their children being exposed to online pornography. But they may not be aware how pervasive this content is, and how young the children are who are being exposed to this for the first time. And research shows parents aren't worrying about drug, alcohol, and other dangerous content online and how it impacts their child's behavior," said ONDCP Director John Walters. "Teens, tweens, and even younger children, are barraged by risky material on the Internet. Parents need to get online and see for themselves what their child has access to. It's time for them to upgrade their parenting skills."

ONDCP's data snapshot of teen online exposure shows that:

- Nearly one in 20 teens online, viewed drug-related videos during a one-month period; 35 percent were under age 16 (Nielsen Online Custom Study);
- Almost 40 percent of drug-related videos contain explicit use of drugs and/or intoxication (Nielsen Online Custom Study);
- Even the youngest kids have access to dangerous online content. More than 8.9 million (8,934,000) two- to 11-year-olds viewed video online in August (Nielsen Online, VideoCensus);
- The average age of first Internet exposure to pornography is 11 years old. Eighty percent of 15- to 17-year-olds have been exposed to hardcore porn multiple times (Internet-Filter-Review.com);

- More than one in eight teens say someone has spread a rumor about them online. Nine percent of teens who use social networking sites say someone has posted an embarrassing picture of them online without their permission ("Cyberbullying and Online Teens." Pew Internet & American Life Project: Data Memo);
- Nearly a third of students say their parents would disapprove if they knew what they were really doing on the Internet (i-SAFE Survey);
- Drug use and underage drinking don't make parents' top 10 list of concerns of their kids' online computer use (State of Internet Security: Protecting Children Online." Webroot Software).

Today's tech-savvy teens are targets for those promoting substance abuse and other risky behaviors by posting pictures to their social-networking pages or uploading video on sites like YouTube.com. The Web and image-sharing technologies available on cell phones have exponentially expanded teens' abilities to see and engage in dangerous behaviors.

When dealing with the Internet, parents need to monitor differently and update their parenting skills. There are three things parents can do to become more familiar with the technologies their teens are using:

- Do Your Homework: Check out the popular teen sites like MySpace and YouTube. See for yourself the kinds of images and video teens can find by searching basic keywords like "teens" and "drugs";
- Set Rules and Consequences: Be explicit about the behaviors and activities that are acceptable in your family and set rules to establish when and how new technologies can be used; and
- Monitor Your Teens: Know who your teen's friends are and where they go, on and offline. Check your computer's browser history and downloads, cell phone text messages, and incoming/outgoing phone numbers.

For more information about how to monitor your teen's technology habits visit Online Exposure: Teens at Risk and Parents Disconnected," which outlines everything parents need to know about social networking, net lingo, and viral video to better understand their teen's online habits.

Since its inception in 1998, the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign has been authorized by Congress to reduce and prevent teen drug use. For more information on the ONDCP National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, visit www.TheAntiDrug.com.

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http://www.prweb.com/releases/ondcp-antidrug-teens/102008/prweb1448454.htm