

Seminar warns of MySpace.com dangers

By: JENNIFER KABBANY - staff writer

TEMECULA ---- Most parents wouldn't let their children wander around the streets of downtown Los Angeles unsupervised ---- but that's basically what they're doing if they allow their children to use the popular Web site MySpace.com without keeping tabs on their activity.

That was the main message from a Parent-Teacher-Student Association-sponsored seminar at James L. Day Middle School on Thursday night that focused on the popular social networking Web site, led by Special Agent Supervisor Alfredo Baclagan with the California Department of Justice.

Using a PowerPoint presentation, Baclagan called the site a "virtual community" where young users can easily fall victim to predators, can point-and-click their way to graphic sexual images posted on personal profiles, and can even score illegal drugs by meeting dealers.

If parents want to protect their children, they must become savvy about the site and stay one step ahead of their kids, he said.

"If you ban it from the house, I can almost guarantee you they are going somewhere else to access it," he told the audience of about 20 parents. "They are going to pull the wool over your eyes."

MySpace.com is an Internet site free to users. Visitors can create their own Web page and post pictures or write a blog, which is a sort of Internet diary used to post a user's profile and interests. Users often link their pages with their friends' pages for "social networking."

Some tips Baclagan gave to parents include:

- n Teens may have two profiles, an innocent-looking one to show parents and a secret one they use actively with their friends. Software that monitors keyboard strokes is a good way to make sure children are telling the truth about their Internet activity.

- n Parents should get their child's MySpace.com password and monitor the profile frequently, including setting it to "private," selecting an option that allows comments to be reviewed before being posted to the site, and turning off the "I'm online" icon that flashes when their child is logged in.

- n Parents should check their child's computer's Web site footprint record often.

"If it's blank, your kids are wiping it out," Baclagan said. "They are deleting it for a reason."

- n Parents who block MySpace.com must realize there are dozens of ways to unblock it, too.

"Don't get lulled into a false sense of security," he said.

He also advised parents not to allow their children to have a computer with Internet access in their bedroom and to check out Web sites such as netlingo.com, which translates instant-messaging acronyms for parents. He also urged parents to make sure their children do not post personal information on their profiles.

For the few parents who did attend the seminar, they said they found it very informative.

"I didn't know all that stuff," parent Tammy Sokach said. "Everyone should have been here."

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