

SOCIAL MEDIA: A double-edged sword

These days nearly everyone belongs to a social network. It is common to find parents, children, co-workers and even the elderly on the networks across the social media world on sites such as Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. With social networks people across the world have access to tools and options that were previously non-existent. However, there are just as many new opportunities to connect as there are to get into potential danger. Social networking has opened up many new doorways for cyber-crime and other dangers.

Students under the age of 13 should not be using the Internet without some form of supervision. As teachers we have to ensure that we do not allow them into these sites. Most social network web sites have a minimum age limit so that young children cannot make profiles. However, it is easy to fool these systems. We must not be the ones to fool the system and provide immature children the gateway to these sites. Those who are older should be made to realise that they should not enter too much private data, such as their home address or what school they go to.

There are a number of scammers on social networks who may try to steal or use the students' personal information which can then be used for potential crime such as identity theft or fraud.

One of the worst things about the crimes committed through social networking sites is that just about anyone is at risk, no matter who they are. Children, adults, working individuals, those who are retired and the elderly often get targeted by hackers, social engineering criminals and other con artists. They can con reasonable people into giving up information, and steal valuable secrets, all without the victim even being aware a crime was committed at all.

Perhaps most saddening is the dangers that may befall to students and educators through social media. Because of the non-confrontational feature of social media in the sense that there is no bodily presence, people – and children – are often bolder, and less inhibited to say things that would otherwise be frowned upon. Not only that, but it is easy to create anonymity, which then encourages complete uninhibited behaviour online and gives rise to ways in which cyber-bullying can happen so easily. It becomes very nasty when a whole network of students target and single out a peer or an educator. Cruel comments are posted *en masse*, on the targeted victim's profile page. It almost becomes a sort of frenzied trend within the network, picking up more and more bullies who make a game out of harassment.



This insidious social networking danger has even caused suicides in some young students and sleepless nights for parents as well as educators.

Should Social Media be avoided?

No, social media does not have to be completely avoided. However, students and teachers have to become more aware of the potential threats and dangers. Social media is a new method of social networking and to ignore it would only isolate you from social communication, and numerous useful or enjoyable aspects of it. But it is paramount for one to be on guard, be vigilant, and be aware of the ways in which social media can be a potential danger to students, their families and even to the teachers in the school.

Source: Based on the article by Melissa Gonzales, reproduced with the kind permission of Optimum Internet Marketing.