

## **Could your children's upbringing be undermined because of Bebo: how can parents and educators handle this new phenomenon?**

How would you feel if your 12 year-old daughter hung around with a group of 20-somethings in the local park? Would you be concerned if they spent time talking about intimate things, recalling what they were up to last weekend, discussing how to get around parental control, showing each other's pictures and sharing domestic videos?

Well, that is exactly what your 12 year-old daughter is doing if she is on Bebo – which you can be pretty sure she is or will soon be. Bebo is social networking website which allows members discuss things together, share personal information, show each other's pictures, take polls and quizzes and watch home-made and commercial videos *ad infinitum!* In Ireland they claim over 800 thousand users: it is only second to Google.

Two senior executives of the Bebo company, based in California, Michael Birch (founder and CEO) and Rachel O'Connell (Chief Safety Officer), were in the UK and Ireland recently to meet with police authorities and social community groups to discuss safety measures and address concerns. They were interviewed by national TV and radio.

When asked at the Tubridy Show why people bother wasting such time with sites like Bebo or MySpace, Birch simply replied, "Because it's fun!". Teenagers love sharing stories with each other, show off their pictures, make comments and gossip about each other, make new friends, listen to each other's playlists, watch funny video clips made by their mates, and so on. They want to stay in contact with their group of friends (they crave a remarkable 'sense of belonging') but they are also prepared to take risks when meeting new people.

But as well as being fun, social websites can have a tremendous influence on the upbringing and formation of a child's character and value system. Parents and educators face strong competition –the Bebo community– when trying to pass on their values and principles to those in their care. They cannot shy away from this technology: they cannot afford to bury the head in the sand and ignore the phenomenon. They need to engage with children about what they are writing, reading, seeing and contributing in Bebo. The alternative would be tantamount to surrendering their children's education and safety to God knows who.

The media recently have highlighted the most obvious dangers of websites like Bebo and MySpace: users receive or gain access to inappropriate material; they become vulnerable to bullying, hate and sectarian violence; they can easily fall pray of predators, etc. Horror stories abound. A 14 year-old girl was raped in Drogheda last month after making contact through Bebo with three men pretending to be teenagers.

But there are other, more subtle dangers that go to the core of the development and formation of young people's character:

- These sites foster curiosity, vanity and jealousy: they're huge popularity contests.
- They encourage dishonesty: you can provide any age that suits your purpose, and you can write any story about what you did last weekend – whether it is true or not, who is to know?
- Users tend to live in their own little world, and excessive use can make them forget how to behave properly in the presence of others.
- They discourage deep and reflective thinking, not to mention proper spelling!
- Most importantly, they become a real obstacle for genuine empathic communication.

Many teenagers now use Bebo and MSN chatting to develop intimate relationships with friends of the opposite sex: a modern-day form of 'dating'. However they miss out on a key aspect of the relationship: empathic communication. At a computer screen, using broken coded language, you cannot see, hear, touch or experience the feelings of the person you are communicating with. Even the use of web-cameras is a poor substitute for a genuine close-up relationship. This is one aspect of social networking websites that could have serious implications for the future of society.

Under pressure from media and parents, companies like MySpace and Bebo have been implementing 'safety' measures to minimise the abuse of these sites by ill-intentioned people. Most of these measures consist of reporting mechanisms back to head-office (or even directly to law enforcement authorities) when witnessing or experiencing abuse.

But the safety measures being introduced by these companies do not prevent against the more fundamental dangers of excessive and inappropriate use of the sites. It is not sufficient to ban or limit access to the site. Parents and educators need to take an active role in monitoring their use. It would be crazy to allow children unrestricted access to the Internet from their own bedrooms: the PC should be in a public place in the family home. Also be aware that if your child's mobile phone is good enough, it is already possible for her to have access to her Bebo profile from it.

So what can parents do? They can warn their children of the dangers they face when using the site. Mentioning a few 'horror stories' (there are lots available on a simple Google search) should be sufficient to deter a youngster from providing personal information (phone, address, school) to strangers or accepting as friends in their site people they have never met in their lives.

Parents can also let their children know that they know or can know what they are up to in Bebo. It's not a matter of spying on them – after all they are prepared to publish what they post in the site to millions of strangers. If a child knows that her mum or dad can gain easy access to their site they might think twice before posting or sharing inappropriate material. As shock therapy, try calling your child to breakfast one morning by her Bebo 'username' and see how she reacts.

Young people need to take into account also that anything nasty they write or post on the internet could come back to bite them in the future. Prospective employers can easily screen new recruits based on stuff they find from them (or about them) in the Internet.

It is important nowadays to foster face-to-face relationships in the home and in other social environments: having meals together, going on outings, hikes, etc with family and friends, engage in team sports, even watch TV together and engage in discussion about it.

Finally, but most importantly, parents and educators need to form the consciences of those under their charge. The most effective way to protect our children against technological advances is to teach them how to use their freedom well: to choose what is beneficial and suitable and to avoid the inappropriate and harmful. Given that their exposure to the latter is greater than ever, the challenge for parents and educators is colossal.

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