

The Capital

Web site gives raw look into the lives of area teenagers

By RYAN BAGWELL, Staff Writer

Guys loved the beach picture on the Gambrills girl's Web page.

With the ocean at her back, the 17-year-old leaned forward in her skimpy blue bikini, calling attention to ample cleavage.

On a 15-year-old Chesapeake High girl's page, a "censored" sign is all that covers her bare chest in a nude bedroom photo. Another shows her from behind, wearing nothing but a swimsuit bottom.

And a 16-year-old Arundel High girl posted a photo of herself and four friends lying on a floor in matching underwear.

They're only a few examples of questionable photos almost 7,000 Anne Arundel teenagers are trading daily, using a popular Web site that many parents have never heard of.

Pictures of underage drinking, drugs, partial nudity and vulgar gestures are common throughout the pages of Myspace.com, the online bulletin board system that allows virtually anyone to post nearly anything they want. There's also a strong sprinkling of the kind of slang and profanity kids use when parents and teachers aren't around.

"Ewwwww," said Lisa Reichnach, a parent of Odenton elementary students who checked out the site for the first time this week. "Some of that stuff on there, it's mostly for teens, but there's nothing on there to prevent anyone from looking at it."

And that's the problem, educators and child safety experts across the country say. As kids reveal personal and intimate information and pictures, they may be putting themselves in danger with sexual predators who may use the material for nefarious purposes online and in the real world.

The free service allows students to set up online blogs, short for "Web logs," where they can post profiles of themselves, favorite bands and even add daily updates. They can also send e-mails and instant messages and designate others online as digital friends.

It's not the only Web site of its kind. Xanga.com and Facebook.com for college students also give users a piece of the Web.

But with more than 45 million people signed up, Myspace is by far the post popular.

E-mails to Myspace staff were not returned. The company does not list a contact phone number.

The site was founded in 2003 and was sold in July to media powerhouse Newscorp Corp., which also owns Fox News Channel, the New York Post and several other British newspapers and U.S. television networks.

Teens' daily forays into the online world often go on under the radar of school officials and parents. Several administrators and school counselors contacted in the last two weeks said they had never heard of Myspace.

But students know plenty about the online community, where inhibitions are relaxed behind the veil of digital anonymity. In Anne Arundel public and private schools, more than 6,900 students ages 16 to 18 have opened accounts on Myspace.

"I'm worried about it, personally," said Jul Lee Martensson, whose sophomore daughter at Archbishop Spalding High started a profile on Myspace about three weeks ago. "I don't know enough about it."

Authorities in some other states have started to catch on, and they're warning parents to be sure their teens keep it clean during their ventures into cyberspace.

Earlier this month, several Boston-area high and middle school principals warned parents to keep tabs on what their kids are posting online. The superintendent of schools in Brecksville, Ohio, warned parents about the site in a Dec. 7 letter.

Parents in Gilbert, Ariz., started warning each other about the online profiles. And police in Marin, Calif., just north of San Francisco, started meeting with parent groups, warning that broadcasting personal information on the Web can be dangerous.

But warnings about these popular sites haven't made it to Anne Arundel County.

On a 16-year-old Crofton teen's page, pictures of students playing the college drinking game "beer pong" are found. "This is Tom," reads one comment on that picture. "I'll give you a lesson in this game ... a REAL DRUNK lesson!"

Adam, a 17-year-old Archbishop Spalding student, poses shirtless in his underwear. A 16-year-old Pasadena girl poses in her underwear; the caption says "sexy."

The profiles often contain detailed information about the subjects. A 17-year-old from Edgewater gives her full name and birth date along with a photo of her doing a keg stand - drinking from a beer keg while doing a handstand.

Experts say revealing that much information about themselves can make it easier for sexual predators to find victims.

"A lot of times, they're just not thinking about the consequences," said John Shehan, who runs the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber Tip Line. "They've got the computer in their home, they feel secure, they don't think about the consequences of posting their lives online."

But that possibility hasn't deterred many county teens from showing themselves in their unmentionables to friends and the entire world.

"I've never heard about nothing weird going on, and there are a lot more revealing (pictures) than mine, so I'm sure whoever it is will choose someone else," wrote Yvonne De Ridder, a South River High senior who posted a picture of herself in a revealing pink bikini.

Even as many teens think showing intimate glimpses into their lives is an innocent activity, most don't realize the potential uses for some of their sites' content.

"The kind of people who will go and look at that besides your friends in school are pedophiles, people who will save your photograph and fantasize about it," said Katya Gifford, program manager of Cyberangels.com, an Internet safety advocacy site.

Not all bad

But sex, drugs and profanity aren't the only thing teens post online. Pictures of friends at football games, family vacations and goofing around at home are common on Myspace.

Teenagers say even the raciest photos and most vulgar blurbs are often innocent jokes.

Internet-savvy parents who know of the site say it can be a good way for kids to communicate at an age when socializing is often the brightest part of their day.

"It's like a way you can identify with your friends. It's kind of a way to express yourself online," said Kerry Cornelius, a sophomore at Chesapeake High.

Her mother, Regina Cornelius, knows about her daughter's online ventures, and keeps up with what she and her friends are saying online. To say online blogs are all bad ignores the benefits for most teenagers, she said.

"I just feel that a knee-jerk reaction against a site like that is not fair to the teens who use it in a positive, social way," she said.

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