

How young is too young for MySpace?

The MySpace.com boom has spread to the elementary-school set, raising questions about the impact of virtual activities on children's development.

Sue Shellenbarger, Wall Street Journal

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Kim Stewart, a Tuxedo, N.Y., mother of three, already has her hands full limiting her 15-year-old daughter's avid use of MySpace.com to two hours a day. Now, she finds herself playing online cop with her 8- and 9-year-old daughters, too.

Amid burgeoning online social-networking opportunities for younger kids, Ms. Stewart's younger daughters "beg and plead" for more than the half-hour of daily computer time she allows them. "But I don't budge," she says.

The MySpace.com boom has spread to the elementary-school set, with a half-dozen social-networking Web sites competing for the time of children as young as 8. While the trend offers valuable educational and play opportunities, it raises questions about the impact of virtual activities on children's development. It also calls for increased monitoring by parents and the setting of careful rules.

Among about a half-dozen social-networking sites for 8- to 15-year-olds, three -- Imbee.com by Industrious Kid, Emeryville, Calif.; ClubPenguin.com, Kelowna, British Columbia; and Tweenland.com, Valencia, Calif. -- have launched in the past year. The limited data available suggest rapid growth; NeoPets.com, an entertainment site owned by Viacom where kids create virtual pets, posted a 3.1% year-to-year increase in unique visitors, or different individuals who visit the site, during September, to 3.58 million, says comScore Networks, Chicago, an Internet data concern. That's compared with 2.5% growth in Internet usage in the U.S. overall.

The under-16 sites pose few of the hazards linked to networking sites for older people. The activities range from chats and blogging to creating virtual pets or characters and acting out roles in virtual cities. For a child to register, the sites typically require a parent's email permission, a parental signature on a permission form, or a parent's credit-card verification. Some limit young children's interchanges to drop-down menus of preapproved words and phrases. Most filter content for inappropriate material and employ live adult monitors who ensure that kids' conversations don't stray off course. Some limit chats or blog access to participants who are preapproved and already known to a child's family. Whyville.net by Numedea Inc., Pasadena, Calif., requires users to pass a "chat license test" on Web safety.

Larry Magid, co-director of BlogSafety.com and co-author of a new book, "MySpace Unraveled," sees little chance of children on these sites being entrapped by pedophiles. Security measures give nonfamily adults little opportunity to gain access or pursue young children, he says.

The sites can offer valuable practice using communication skills; the benefits depend on the content, says Sandra L. Calvert, director of the Children's Digital Media Center at Georgetown University. Some use "an intrinsically interesting environment to teach kids something," she says. Whyville.net, a virtual community where kids play games and take jobs as citizens, incorporates educational material from NASA and other scientific organizations.

Barbara Tien of Berkeley, Calif., says the sites have helped teach her two children, 10 and 15, valuable lessons in computer literacy. Interacting online in the protected environment of the under-16 sites helps her daughters practice safety rules she has taught them, such as withholding personal information and securing personal files.

Robyn Tippins of Roanoke, Va., says blogging on Imbee.com has improved her 9-year-old daughter's writing and self-esteem. Jay Goss, Whyville.net's chief operating officer, says one user

wrote so much for the site's community newspaper that she put it on her college resume and is now majoring in journalism.

Little research has been done on how transferring so much play and social interaction to the virtual world affects young children's development. For 11- and 12-year-olds, the sites can serve as an "identity workshop," where they figure out who they are and how they relate to others, says Sherry Turkle, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor specializing in the social impact of science and technology.

How younger children are affected is more complicated, Dr. Turkle says. Clearly, kids can benefit from learning how to function online, she says. However, little is known about the developmental impact of blurring the line between the virtual and physical worlds -- such as becoming emotionally attached to virtual creatures that seem "almost alive," yet seem to vanish under certain circumstances, she says. "Parents should be staying close."

One rule of thumb is to try to maintain balance among children's activities. Online play or socializing is harmful if it crowds out reading, physical activity, one-on-one interaction with parents or face-to-face socializing. As a general rule, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than one to two hours of discretionary "screen time" a day, including recreational computer use, TV and videogames.

Seven to nine years are probably the youngest ages at which kids should use social-networking sites, says Ellen Wartella, provost and professor of psychology, University of California, Riverside. A younger child might better sit on a parent's lap to read online material together. Similarly, a 7-year-old might email relatives while sitting next to a parent, but shouldn't be communicating with people they don't know, Dr. Wartella says.

Another rule: Watch the impact on your particular child. Ms. Tippins sets a general limit of two to three hours a day on her daughter's use of Imbee.com. But if her daughter becomes irritable or moody, Ms. Tippins concludes "she's been away from the family too long," and calls a halt sooner.

Email me at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.