

MySpace For The Sandlot Set

Social networks like Club Penguin are quickly catching pre-teens' attention

"I bought a flat-screen TV and a stereo system!" shouts my nine-year-old son, Lee, as he shakes me awake one morning. For a kid who typically needs to be dragged out of bed, this is curious behavior. I'm worried. Did Lee get hold of my credit card and go on some QVC binge? "Nooooo, Mom," he says. He quickly explains that the TV and the stereo are virtual. Since that morning in July, Lee often has been waking up early to partake of his new obsession: social networking among the sandlot set.

Lee is big into his membership in Club Penguin, one of the new sites aiming to be the MySpace.com (NWS) for 8- to 12-year-olds. Officially launched in March, it clocked in 2.1 million unique visitors during the month of August, up from 899,000 in March, according to comScore Networks Inc.'s Media Metrix. It joined sites imbee and Tweenland.com, where kids can craft personal pages with videos, photos, and blogs. Some of these sites also offer educational games for kids, joining a growing online community of sites that give parents a break and kids a chance to learn. "Addressing young kids is very difficult because of privacy laws, but it seems these companies have figured out a model that works," says David Card, vice-president and senior analyst at JupiterResearch.

It turns out there are lots of little brothers and sisters who have watched in wonder as their older siblings labor over designing their Web pages. "Hot new things for teenagers always trickle down to younger and younger audiences," says Robin Raskin, a consultant in new media.

TRAINING WHEELS

Actually, social networking is migrating to the whole family. Not only are there sites for college and high school students and preteens, but new networks aimed at keeping families connected are popping up, too. Niche networks that reflect lifestyle interests, from golfing to gardening, are also gaining momentum.

Parents are paying more heed to the kiddie sites because they know their children will learn, work, and live online. Computer skills such as social networking are becoming as much a part of the success-in-life portfolio as addition and subtraction, says Herbert S. Lin, senior scientist at the National Research Council. Parents' support of these sites stems in part from the idea that it's better for their kids to get their online introductions in a controlled environment -- as many of these sites promise -- than venture into the cyberjungle alone. "They provide Internet safety on training wheels," says Raskin.

Indeed, most of these MySpace-for-pre-tweeners sites have stiff parental controls, safety features, and advertising-free palettes. Several have word filters, employees who monitor the discussions in real time, and the requirement that a parent's credit card and e-mail address be provided to ensure adult approval.

Even so, pre-tweeners' social networking has its critics. "There are no assurances who your child is talking to," says Larry Magid, co-founder of BlogSafety.com. And while the sites offer more interactivity and educational potential than video games or TV, a screen's a screen, and many parents agree the time using it should be limited.

Still, I figure the interactive skills Club Penguin is giving Lee are preferable to TV. Lately, after school, Lee tells me he has to run off to log into Club Penguin. His friends are waiting for him.