

## **Sex, drugs and violence: Find them on your kid's MySpace page**

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More than half of today's teens make references to sex, alcohol, drugs or violence in their online profiles, according to new research out Monday. In a 2007 study of 500 publicly available MySpace pages created by 18-year-old Americans, researchers found that 54 per cent mentioned or showed pictures of risky or unhealthy behaviour. Sexual content showed up in 24 per cent of the pages, 41 per cent of the pages included drug use, 37 per cent alcohol and 14.4 per cent violence.

One of the study's authors, pediatrician and children's media expert Dimitri Christakis, says he and his colleagues knew that any survey of teen use of social networks might find nods to high-risk activities. "But we didn't know just how much. It's higher than I imagined."

A noted interest in dangerous behaviour may attract the attention of online predators, says Dr. Christakis, a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle and an associate professor in the school of medicine at the University of Washington. And, he adds, for many kids, such postings can hobble future college and job applications.

These are consequences teens are not well-equipped to understand, he says.

"The teenage brain is a work in progress," he says. "It's like a vehicle with gas pedals and no brake."

To see whether health professionals might be able to convince teens to hit the brakes, Dr. Christakis and his colleagues undertook a follow-up study in which researchers sent informal letters to 18- to 20-year-olds from a pediatrician's MySpace page. The notes warned them about the risks of their posts and directed them to information about sexually transmitted diseases. One of the researchers, Megan Moreno, an adolescent medicine physician and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was the personality behind the "Dr. Meg" messages.

After a three-month period, 42.1 per cent of those who had received letters either removed risky references or set their profiles to "private," compared with 29.5 per cent of a control group who did not receive the letter. Some recipients of the note wrote Dr. Meg back to tell her they had no idea their profiles were so public.

Teens appeared more willing to curb their references to sexual behaviour than drug references when prompted. Dr. Christakis and Dr. Moreno suggest that teens may be more sensitive to what others think about their sex lives than their drug and alcohol use.

Both studies appear in the January edition of the American Medical Association's journal Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.

While the researchers will continue to explore other methods of intervening, they urge parents to step in as well.

"A lot of parents are asleep at the switch," Dr. Christakis says. A teen's MySpace or Facebook page is not a private diary, he says.

While setting up their own social networking accounts can help parents understand the phenomenon, experts say it is reasonable for a teen to ask that they not post messages on their site. But it's also reasonable for parents to have access to their teen's site, not only to look for risky behaviours but also to stay in tune with their kid and his interests.

"To me, it's a condition of use of the Internet," Dr. Christakis says.