

## Web Wakeup Call for Parents!

by Michael W. Lee

Less than a year ago, I wrote a Perspective on a fairly new phenomenon called BLOGS. There are so many things to write about concerning education and families that I really don't need to write about the same topic twice. However, I am so concerned about our children's exposure and activity on the World Wide Web that I am updating last year's article with critical new information that parents need to know. I know this is a long article, but please bear with me because this information just might prevent a tremendous heartache in the future of your family.

Parents, there are so many things available to your child on the web that will pollute his heart and mind. Unfortunately, based on my conversations with many parents, I am horrified to see that most parents have little to no idea what their kids are doing on the web. It is imperative that parents are up to speed and on top of these new developments. If you choose to say, "Well, I'm not really into computers," then maybe you'd better not let your child on one!

For example, would any parent drop his child off weekly at a movie theatre that had three X-rated movies alongside three G-rated movies and simply tell the child to make a good choice while the parent drives away? Of course not. We all understand temptation, and while we would like to trust absolutely our children, we must admit that we also are susceptible to all kinds of temptations and in need of checks and boundaries in our own lives. The movie theatre example is no different than the computer. Everything is available to the child, so we as parents must be wise.

At this point, I am going to insert some of last year's article on BLOGS and then introduce new information as the article progresses. You can see the original "Perspective" online at the school's website. It is called "Web Megaphone."

### *Getting into the subject matter*

What is a BLOG? It is a place where anyone—and I mean anyone in the world—can record a daily diary for all to see. Any person can set up a BLOG and start telling the world how they feel, what they did today, their view on life—anything. It seems to be another step in the evolution of communication on the web. First there was email where you communicated with someone that you definitely knew. Then there were email groups where everybody was emailing everybody in the group and everybody was replying to everybody in the group. That was getting a little messy—emails were flying everywhere.

Then the chat rooms were born. Now you could talk to people that you may or may not know, and everybody could talk at the same time. Many opted out of the chat rooms because of the foul things that might be said and the predators that searched for potential victims. Online communication was getting ugly and dangerous.

Instant messaging (IM) quickly grew in popularity as it combined the safety of a known group of people with the ability to have everyone talk together from anywhere and anytime in the world. Most parents are aware of the captivating power of instant messaging and have limited their children's use of it (teens will stay on it until their typing fingers bleed).

Now comes the BLOG. The BLOG is different from past methods of communication. It is more than an email or an instant message but not the same as a diary. A diary was a way for people to take their most personal, most secret thoughts, and somehow release them through the writing of ink on paper. Sometimes it was a way to help a person cope with events by cataloging the struggle. Sometimes it was as if the diary was an imaginary person who would always listen. It was a private matter, and anyone who would read the diary of

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another without their permission was perceived as a very inconsiderate and unkind person.

But where a diary is personal and secret, a BLOG is personal and public. When visiting one BLOG site, I found that there were many other sites linked to it. I camped out for a while on the Web and read what had been written by youths that I know and others that I do not know. There were a handful of sites where youth wrote about their lives in somewhat harmless and silly banter. But there were many sites that shocked me when I read what they had posted.

There in plain sight for anyone to see were daily entries laced with profanity, hate (for parents, peers, and authority figures), sexual references, comments of suicide, self-pity, and a desire to be wild. There was a common denominator in all of the BLOGS: no mention of Jesus Christ and every mention of self and relationships with peers. I know some of these youth. They come from families where they have been in church for years and have loving parents, but the posts on their BLOG showed a whole new side of their person.

***The latest on what's available***

That was 9 months ago. Now we are in December of 2005 and I want to give you the heads-up on what has progressed.

BLOGs have continued to proliferate at the rate of thousands of new BLOGs every day. Originally, Xanga was the king of BLOGs but now several new key players have come onto the scene – MySpace, Multiply, Friendster, Tribe, Linkedln, Facebook, LiveJournal, and Google's Blogspot, among others. It is now estimated that about 20% of all teens between ages 12 and 17 have a BLOG. That doesn't even account for the statistic for kids that have a BLOG who are aged 8-12, and of course we aren't including the number of BLOGS that have been created by adults. But to get a general idea, we can look at an article in this month's Wall Street Journal where it is stated that there are more than 89 million members using the BLOG cites above.

Along with the growth of BLOGs, the real life stories grow of predators who have gleaned enough information from these sites to actually show up at a kid's home, work, or school. Clearly, there is a real danger to our children from

Pedophiles, pornographers and other sick and twisted people.

The technology evolution on the web continues: now there is a thing called a VLOG. Did you guess what that is? That's a BLOG with a video camera. Essentially, all someone needs to make a so-called video log (VLOG) is a digital camera that can capture images and a high speed Internet connection. And guess what? You can download (copy) a video from a VLOG to a video device like an IPOD. That could mean some fun stuff if this technology is used appropriately or a nightmare if used inappropriately. Take the following excerpt from the Dallas Morning News as it addresses the dangers that our kids face as technologically savvy minors:

*Monday's New York Times published a jaw dropping account of how Justin Berry, a lonely and isolated 13 year-old-boy, used his inexpensive webcam and broadband connection initially to meet other teens, but quickly became drawn into a web of online pedophiles who paid him to undress and perform sex acts live, on video streaming from his own room. Over the next six years, Berry, now an adult who is cooperating with federal prosecutors, made hundreds of thousands of dollars from men who paid him handsomely and rewarded him with gifts for his online sex shows. And his mother never suspected a thing.*

*In fact, the Times reported that a surprisingly large network of minors exploiting themselves for paying adult porn seekers has grown up on the Internet beneath the clueless gaze of parents and law enforcement authorities.*

Shifting to the college scene, there are 5.9 million members using Facebook, another type of BLOG where students can gossip about friends and interests, share photos and flirt. However, some students are also posting more personal details and even racy photos leading some universities to begin questioning the security of their students.

***The Christian Worldview on why this is happening***

Why are our children so drawn to these mediums of communication? What does it mean?

I do not know for sure, but I have some thoughts for us. First, human beings created in the image of

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God were designed to be social beings. We have a need to communicate with other human beings. So children who want to communicate are normal, and the desire is good. What we have in some of these BLOGS and VLOGS is perversion. Clearly, there is such a desperate need to communicate that some teens are saying anything about themselves while hoping for someone to read and respond. They are lonely and in need of a personal relationship where they can share their thoughts, including all of their hurts.

For teens like this, the BLOG or VLOG is a “web megaphone” that is screaming, “Someone listen to me!” That begs the question, “Who should they have a relationship with and how did it get to this point?”

I want to be careful not to say more than I should. This is a complex subject and there are no answers or systems of raising kids that guarantee that our children will grow up to be “perfect.” The answer to the question is the parents.

I can say that the parents should be the ones who have the relationship with the teen because it is the parents who have been entrusted with the nurturing of this child since day one, and they are responsible for his or her wellbeing (social, emotional and spiritual). That last comment is not meant to send anybody on a guilt trip. Because of the pollution of sin in our lives, there are no perfect parents or families, and we know that we will struggle in this world with our own weaknesses and those of our children until we die or Jesus returns. Are you not glad there is forgiveness in Christ for our parenting mistakes?

These forms of communication that are being used in an ungodly way should be a wake-up call to parents. They make it evident that we are not connected to our children. Your children might be polite and respectful, but anybody can be beautiful on the outside but dead on the inside (Matt. 23:27). We must take an honest look at our relationship with our children and ask, “Do I have a good enough relationship with my child to discuss what is going on in their heart at all times?”

Question: If, in fact, these kids want to talk so badly that they will cry out on the Internet to anybody who will read it, why do they not just talk to us, the parents? I probably answer that it is

because you told them you did not want to talk to them. You say, “I never said that. We never even had a conversation like that.” And I say to you—and myself—that you said it with your actions by being too busy to be available, or you said it by your inactions by not consistently spending time with your children. In other words, they never came to talk with you about anything tough because you signaled a lack of interest. When did that happen?

That happened gradually over the thirteen year time period before they were teens, thus laying the foundation for a shallow relationship with your child. As I personally reflect on time that I have given my family over the years, I am lamenting over where I have come up short.

Another reason for a child to put their life on a BLOG is to get attention or be accepted. This reason is actually related to the first reason. Are our children secure enough in themselves as people that they will not go out looking for others to show them or tell them that they are okay or, better yet, cool? Have we instilled in our children a healthy view of themselves so that they will not succumb to the temptation to impress peers or people they do not even know?

That should lead us to the very foundation for any rational and healthy thinking: Jesus Christ. A child cannot be happy apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ. A person—of any age—can never be at peace with himself until he understands that he is a mess apart from being adopted into God’s family through faith in Christ and the forgiveness of his sins. And while a relationship with God is the key to a healthy life, we know that parents are put in the position to shepherd children to a knowledge and relationship with Him. Parents are the ones to not only teach children about the God of the universe, they are to also model a love for that God of the universe. And, finally, parents are to model God’s love for their children, including the willingness — yes, even the great desire — to sacrifice their time for their children, just as God sacrificed what was held most dear to Him (His Son), in order to bring these little ones into the family of God.

For those of you who have young children, please take this to heart. I believe more than ever that we

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are seeing the fruit of a generation of adults that have become too busy and too overwhelmed to spend time building lasting relationships with their children. If we lose the ability to be heard by them, we forfeit the opportunity for them to hear the greatest story ever told from us: the gospel. Make changes in your life that will show your children that you care enough to talk to them and listen.

There is nothing else that you can do to love them better and to make your love be known to them. For those who are in trouble right now, it is never too late to go to your children and tell them that you love them and follow that professed love with giving them your time on a regular basis to listen to them and develop a relationship. They may not respond at first, but eventually they will. You see, deep inside, they want to talk to you—if you prove your love to them by being there.

***Practical Helps***

Probably the simplest and most effective way to monitor your child's web activity is to **NOT ALLOW THE CHILD TO HAVE A COMPUTER IN THEIR ROOM**. Allowing them to go online in their own bedroom without supervision is asking for trouble.

There are fairly easy ways to track where your child has been on your home computer. You can use the history log on your web browser or do a search on one of the free blogging services by using the child's name or school or some keyword or phrase that they may have used on their site. However, the children can easily foil these methods by erasing the history log or creating passwords on a blog site.

The most certain way to know where your child has gone is to install tracking software that will give you information on every website that has been visited and even the passwords to get into them. Two companies that sell that kind of product are called Specter Pro and eBlaster.

Maybe all of this computer stuff is Greek to you? Get together with one of your friends and get them to help you understand what we are all up against. We would do that for any other type of challenge, so don't neglect to do it on this one! Like anything else, make it your business to know what threatens your children and your family. And pray. ■

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