

Personal Security Important in Online Communities

Although DoD servers block most social networking Web sites, students and educators can still access them from home. For DoDEA students, the unique demands of being a military dependent come with a certain pride and camaraderie. Online social networking sites allow students and staff to celebrate their connection to DoDEA and stay connected with friends and family around the world. Moreover, as their physical world changes due to frequent moves, a virtual community, when used safely, can be one source of stability for dependents as they adapt to their new home.

Many DoDEA educators enjoy taking part in online communities for the same reason. While participation in virtual communities such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn does not pose a direct threat, the information shared on them should be safeguarded to ensure it does not fall into the wrong hands.

Security concerns are affected by the size of the social network. For example, on Facebook alone, there are a number of DoDEA-specific groups. Students and educators at DoDEA schools have also started smaller online groups for members of their own school community. In a smaller virtual community, most members may attend school or work together in one location. Within a smaller group, it is easier to control who is a member and what information is collectively shared online. Group administrators can change settings to require that all new members are approved.



Larger groups are generally open to all users of a social networking site so group members will not know everyone. Each individual is responsible for his or her own personal security. Limiting access to individual profiles and Web sites can help protect personal information, but the burden remains on the individual to limit access to their own profile. Some large DoDEA social communities exist online. One group dedicated to DoDEA students has over 600 members. A slightly larger group exists dedicated to “DoDDS Teachers,” and 20,000 members belong to a group for former DoDEA students. Note that none of the Facebook or MySpace communities are officially sponsored by DoDEA. Rather, they are established by students and faculty in their personal capacity.

Every member of the DoDEA community shares responsibility for protecting the mission of those serving our country — the parents of DoDEA students. For the security of our deployed service members, avoid sharing information specific to a unit’s operations (location, number of troops, mission, etc.) on social networking sites, blogs, or personal Web sites.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sponsors OnGuardOnline.gov, a Web site that provides tips on how to secure personal computers, and protect private information. Tips from the DHS on how to use social networking sites safely are available at www.onguardonline.gov/topics/social-networking-sites.aspx. OnGuardOnline.gov also has a Web page dedicated to “Kids’ Privacy,” at www.onguardonline.gov/topics/kids-privacy.aspx. ■