

Don't worry, kids, Stanford will teach Mom, Dad about Facebook

February 11 2009, By Lisa M. Krieger

Status Update: Mom and Dad want to join Facebook. And, like much else about Silicon Valley parenting, they're enlisting experts to learn how.

A new "Facebook for Parents" course, taught at Stanford University, starts this month and is already full. The four-part lecture series even comes with a lab where Stanford students provide one-on-one Facebook tutoring.

"Responsible parenting means being aware of what your children are doing," said Linda Phillips, who is teaching the class with her brother, Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg. Phillips is the mother of eight children - seven of whom are also her Facebook "friends."

Originally limited to those with a college e-mail address, Facebook has opened its digital doors. So what was once a youthful private party increasingly has parent chaperones, sticking out like eight-track cartridges at the Apple store.

A social networking site open to anyone over 13, Facebook allows users to connect with one another by asking to be "friends" with other members. Once friends, users share conversations, photos and daily updates from the elegant - prom dresses and poetry - to the embarrassing - say, Fred silly and drunk at last Friday's party.

Some kids say that a "friend" request from parent is like discovering

Dad at your beer pong game. Or bumping into Mom in the dressing room of Forever 21.

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When Facebook first opened itself to the public in 2007, students circulated an online petition called "Don't Let My Parents Onto Facebook!" to founder Mark Zuckerberg, pleading for a reversal of the decision. Since then, there has been a proliferation of no parent groups, such as "For The Love of God - Don't Let Parents Join Facebook." One group is hosted by "The Bureau of Endangered Generation Gaps."

Adults older than 35 accounted for 3.6 million - or 9 percent - of Facebook's 2007 demographics, and are the fast-growing segment of users. Many say they enjoy keeping track of their high school crush, that friend from book club or the neighbor's kitchen remodel.

"I think that it is all right if they are getting Facebook accounts," said Amin Ronaghi, a Palo Alto High School senior.

"However," he added, "I would rather have them not add me."

Many parents would no sooner read their teen's profile than snoop through his or her diary.

But there is a place for responsible parenting, according to many experts. Connecting online has become a new form of dinner table conversation.

"It's great that more parents are wanting to try this new mode of interaction with their very social virtual children," said Larry Rosen, professor of psychology at California State University-Dominguez Hills and author of the book "Me, MySpace and I: Parenting the Net Generation."

"It shows that people really want to learn what their kids are doing," he said.

In the free Stanford class, open to all parents but designed for those with children younger than 18, Fogg and Phillips teach such subjects as "The ABC's of Facebook," "Ten Steps To Protect Loved Ones," and "Friending, Posting and Updating: Life Skills for the Future."

"It isn't about spying on kids. And it's not just about safety and importance of teaching children to guard their reputation," Fogg said. "It helps you build a relationship."

Some teens say they accept parents as friends. A few simply ignore them, much as they might shrug off a plea to take out the trash. Most fiddle with privacy controls: accepting, but limiting what parents can see.

Stanford junior Kelley Winn added her mom because "let's face it, you can't reject your parents as friends," she said. "As long as they use Facebook as a means of networking or reconnecting with old friends, and not as a way to pretend they're back in college, I think it's perfectly find for them to be on the site."

It was inevitable that adults would want to join, said Stanford student Zev Karlin-Neumann. "I don't see it as particularly good or bad, just the evolution of a popular social networking site. "... People have adjusted. I know many friends who have 'cleaned up' their profiles."

Kids' advice to their parents: Don't leave gooey greetings. Don't friend their friends. Don't browse their friend's photos. And just as you'd rather not hear about their hangovers, they're not interested in your hot flashes.

Ohio State grad Stephanie Wiseman was conflicted when her mother joined but asked that her friends accept Mom:

"Please make her feel welcome. Friend request her (she has no idea what that is though ... so be patient if it takes a while), and in true Facebook fashion get drunk and write on her wall."

ON THE WEB

"Facebook for Parents:" facebookforparents.org/

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