

Keeping teens safe from 'dangerous' apps

By Andrew Adams
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SALT LAKE CITY — Kik. Omegle. Even "Bang With Friends." They may not be household names for everybody yet, but the social media apps and websites are growing increasingly familiar to kids, teens and adults. Collectively they're raising fears in parents and law enforcement alike.

"Some of those websites you had me look at really concern me," said Paul Murphy, spokesman for the Utah Attorney General's Office.

Murphy, who also is the state Amber Alert coordinator, characterized sites that encourage random meetings and somewhat random sexual encounters as "dangerous."

"They're bad for adults, they're terrible for kids, and they're just simply dangerous," Murphy said. "I was appalled at what I saw."

Omegle promises chats with random strangers. Riverton mom Anne Brown quickly learned how that can be problematic from the experiences of her 12-year-old daughter and the daughter's friends.

The girls, according to Brown, downloaded the app out of curiosity. While Omegle states that it requires users to be 18 - or 13 with parental consent and supervision - **Brown said some of her daughter's friends clicked past the age warning, got in chats, created fake profiles on Kik claiming they were older, and unexpectedly got pictures of male genitalia in return.** Kik is an instant message service that also allows the sharing of photos.

"These kids do not realize the implication," Brown said.

While Brown said her daughter was startled and deterred from Omegle by the first random greeting, she said she felt compelled to come forward with the story in hopes of warning other parents what is likely lurking on other teens' smartphones.

"You have to think about the unthinkable," she said.

Perhaps the most controversial of any of the new apps, "Bang With Friends" has already drawn criticism for not delivering what it promises for adults 18+. The premise of the site is to discretely set up sexual encounters with Facebook friends. Those friends only know about somebody's interest, when they reciprocate through the app.

Still, reports late last week began to show that users of the app could be "outed" by somebody else who was not signed up for "Bang With Friends" (<http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2013/05/09/link-exposes-users-of-bang-with-friends/>).

"Whatever you post online, it's out there," said social media expert Pete Codella, also vice president of marketing and public relations at Alexander's in London.

"Even if you say it's private, there are ways that people can view that information - like through a friend of a friend on Facebook who might be connected and might be able to see a certain photo album. If you're looking for work, certainly you should be mindful of your own digital persona," he said.

Codella warned of additional risks for underage users.

"There are people out there who are going to misuse these tools and could take advantage - especially of children," Codella said.

Searching for Solutions

Shooing kids away from the latest problematic apps is a daunting task for parents, especially because they seem to pop up faster than most people can keep pace.

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—Pete Codella

There is software. For just under \$130 a year, [Mobile Spy](#) records phone activities and accompanying GPS locations. Another program, [Phone Sheriff](#), allows parents to block certain activities.

"I believe that's absolutely missing the point," Codella countered.

Codella said parents are more effective in developing trusting relationships with children.

"That's why you talk to your kids about these things, and you teach them what's appropriate and you lead by example," he said.

Codella recommended knowing kids' passwords and telling them their activities and emails will be checked. Police additionally suggest not allowing children to download apps they're uncomfortable with them using.

Brown now demands her daughter surrender her passwords to her social media accounts and warns her children if they run afoul of the household rules.

"If this happens, say goodbye to your phone," she asserted. "You have to be firm about that."