

forget about facebook



If you're looking to harness the potential of

online social networking in the classroom whilst avoiding the pitfalls of adult-oriented sites, **John Sutton** can help...

Go into any junior class in England and ask how many children have a Facebook account, and I guarantee that at least four will raise their hands – frequently, many more. It goes without saying that the terms of use for Facebook dictate that children under 13 are excluded from the site, yet further questioning will reveal that many of them are using the site with their parents' blessing.

Schools react to this in a number of ways: filtering out Facebook for everyone including staff; open evenings discussing internet safety; letters home. One teacher I know banned all discussion of Facebook on the premises, whilst another was so concerned at the use of the site by some of her class that she resorted to reporting them to Facebook herself – which is tricky unless you can identify the precise account of the child in question.

A recent report showed that in the UK, more than 25% of children between the age of eight and 12 had an account on Facebook, Bebo, MySpace or similar, so what's the fascination with adult-oriented social networking sites that draws children to them in such large numbers? Since time immemorial children's play has revolved around role-playing adult behaviour, and I think the obsession with adult social networking is an extension of this idea: it's children aping adult behaviour without understanding the consequences and risks.

The computer industry has long recognised that children are attracted to the internet as a tool for social interaction. Consequently, a plethora of social networking sites aimed at children have grown up, amongst them Disney's Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters and the new Togetherville. These sites are hugely popular, but, being aimed solely at children, they don't have that 'cool' factor that appeals so much to the young. As we all know, once children of a certain age identify something as being aimed at children, it loses its appeal and becomes 'childish'.

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Resources

BUILD A SOCIAL NETWORK

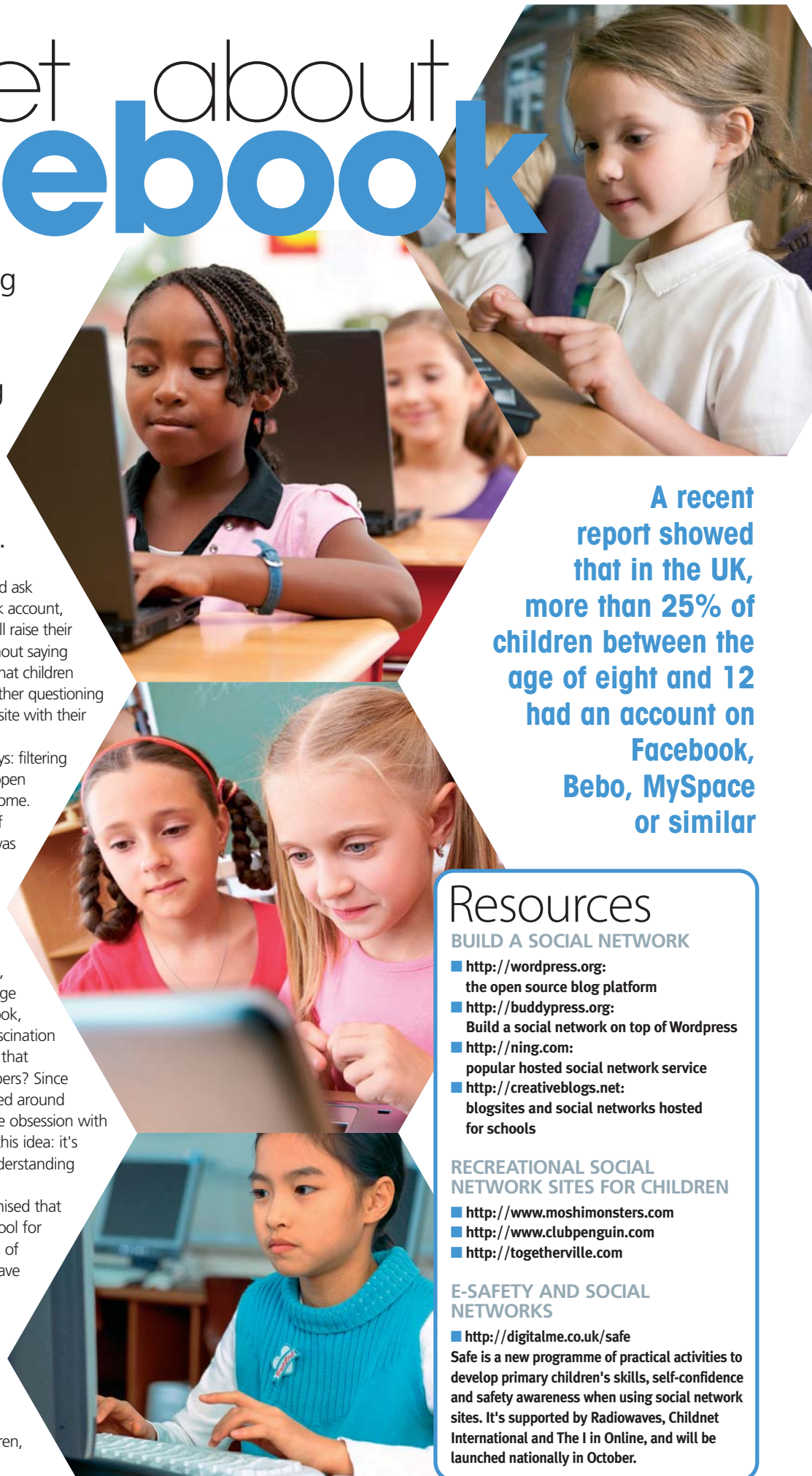
- <http://wordpress.org>: the open source blog platform
- <http://buddypress.org>: Build a social network on top of Wordpress
- <http://ning.com>: popular hosted social network service
- <http://creativeblogs.net>: blogsites and social networks hosted for schools


RECREATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORK SITES FOR CHILDREN

- <http://www.moshimonsters.com>
- <http://www.clubpenguin.com>
- <http://togetherville.com>

E-SAFETY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

- <http://digitalme.co.uk/safe>
Safe is a new programme of practical activities to develop primary children's skills, self-confidence and safety awareness when using social network sites. It's supported by Radiowaves, Childnet International and The I in Online, and will be launched nationally in October.





How do we harness the power of social networks in primary schools?

Schools, however, do recognise the value of online collaboration and its ability to create hugely engaging learning experiences for children, and this leaves them with something of a dilemma. On one hand, they want to teach children the importance of managing their online presence in order to guard against risky behaviour; on the other, they want to harness the social opportunities to foster links and learning across the world.

Networking opportunity

I recently set up a social network for schools as a project to run alongside the World Cup. Called Blogtheworldcup.net, the idea was simple – 32 classes would take part, one for each country involved, with each class being assigned a country to blog about. Rather than a mere collection of blogs, the project had a social dimension: children could make 'friendship requests' with other children (and teachers), manage and update their own profiles, 'like' the posts of others and comment on each other's profiles, and even use the '@' sign to pass on public messages, just like Twitter. In other words, I'd tried to give the site the features that seem to attract children to adult social networks. I was interested to see if the children and teachers involved in the project could make use of these social features to further their learning and increase engagement.

The site was built using the open source blogging platform Wordpress, with the social features added by the BuddyPress plugin. BuddyPress adds features such as user profiles, forums, groups and so on, taking Wordpress beyond a purely blog-based platform into the realm of the social network. Both had the advantage of being free, so it was simply a case of hosting the site and providing the necessary internet bandwidth to cope with the traffic I hoped the site would generate.

Some statistics. In the four week period of the World Cup the site received over half a million hits. It had about 650 members, of whom around 30 were teachers. Children from as far away as New Zealand blogged, commented and interacted with schools across the UK. The German embassy in London even found their way to the site and left comments.

Free to choose

One of the great things about the learning in the project was that although each class had a tight focus – i.e. they were blogging about their allotted country – no attempt was made to dictate what was posted on each blog. Indeed schools were free to take the project in any direction they wanted. Some used it as an extension of their planning for a particular curriculum focus; others used it as an ICT club activity or as a Study Support Centre session. Some blogged about football, some about culture, others about language, or food or whatever. Crucially, children across the project visited each others' blogs, added comments, befriended each other and pinched ideas. This cross-fertilisation within a fairly loose framework was one of the key features that made the project such a success – and the overtly 'educational' nature of the site, with the presence of lots of teachers, didn't seem to dim or make any 'less real' the enjoyment, engagement and learning that the children got from it.

What lessons can we draw from the success of this project? We know that secondary school children are using Facebook to collaborate over school projects informally without a second thought. It's a meeting place as natural to them as the street corner is. The question is, how do we harness the power and simplicity of social networks to enable and engage learners in primary schools, which are understandably reluctant to experiment in this area. Maybe the answer for the adventurous is to set up and manage your school community's own social network?

The verdict

TEACHERS INVOLVED WITH BLOGTHEWORLD CUP.NET WERE FULL OF ENTHUSIASM FOR THE PROJECT...

"A thoroughly valuable experience for them as far as safety and etiquette in cyberspace are concerned. An excellent chance to teach these for an actual purpose. It also led to much discussion about Facebook too and safety issues arising around that."

Claire Cheeseman, Suumerland Primary School, Auckland NZ

"From a teacher's perspective, I took a risk – a big risk! I scrapped all my final half term planning 24 hours before the term began and decided to throw myself and my pupils into the project. So, the process began of linking numeracy areas/topics and literacy genres to Germany and the World Cup. This was really fun, I felt like the chains were off! From this moment, I embarked on the best four weeks of teaching and learning in my career!"

David Mitchell, Heathfield Community Primary School, Bolton

"Aside from creating content, we liked looking at what other schools had added to their blogs. The social aspect of the project, where children could 'friend' each other was a brilliant addition too, and I hope that those children in my class who have really used this social feature continue to talk to the children in other schools that they've 'friended'."

Simon Widdowson, Porchester Junior School, Nottingham