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ARE you one of those who can't live without Facebook-ing, checking or updating your Facebook account every day and can't wait to share your photo with your friends through the site? Then you are one of those who contributed to making Malaysians the top Facebook users in the world.

According to a recent international survey, Malaysians had the most Facebook friends in the world, on average 233 friends per user. Malaysians also spent the most time on Facebook in the world, nine hours per week.

Facebook is also the most visited website in Malaysia, with more than 10 million subscribers, and expected to hit 20 million by the year of 2012. Malaysians are the most active Facebook users in the world.

It was reported recently that gangsters were using Facebook as a platform to invite students to join them. They even organised illegal racing, using pictures of famous artistes to attract people to click on the page.

This group targeted mainly secondary students, offering protection to them once they joined the group.

The Government has vowed to fight against cyber gangsterism. Perhaps, Internet safety, especially for children, should be looked at more closely. Further studies need to be carried out on Internet and social networking usage among youths in Malaysia.

It is crucial that children and parents are conversant with the risks of going online. These need to be addressed to create a safe Internet environment for children.

According to Agence France-Presse, a recent study showed that some 7.5 million of the 20 million minors who used Facebook in the past year were younger than 13, and a million of them were bullied, harassed or threatened on the site.

The study also showed that more than five million Facebook users were 10 years old or younger, and they were using Facebook largely without parental supervision.

More than five million US households had been exposed in the past year to some type of abuse via Facebook, including virus infection, identity theft and bullying, said the study.

A Consumer Research and Resource Centre (CRR) visit to a primary school in Penang discovered that of the 500 students surveyed some even as young as seven years old more than 80% had Facebook accounts.

And about 58% of the respondents had nasty, worrying or frightening experiences on the Internet.

Facebook has set the subscriber age requirement at 13 and above. However, the system can't detect those who lie about their age. Even then, those above 13 are also vulnerable to Internet risks.

Do parents know what their children do on the Net and the problems they face? There are various possibilities of Internet risk, including identity theft, virus infection and pornography.

Parents have to protect their children against Internet risks. They need to update themselves from time to time on the latest issues on Internet safety.

Parents can guide their children on using the Internet. They should also talk about the possible risks and how to protect themselves, such as never providing personal details over the Internet.

The computer and Internet service should be in a public area of the house and not inside the children's bedroom.

YU KIN LEN, Petaling Jaya.

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