

# Trend Alert:

## ASK.FM - DIGITAL PLAYGROUND FOR TEEN TROUBLE *By Walt Mueller*

### Trend Alert: Ask.fm

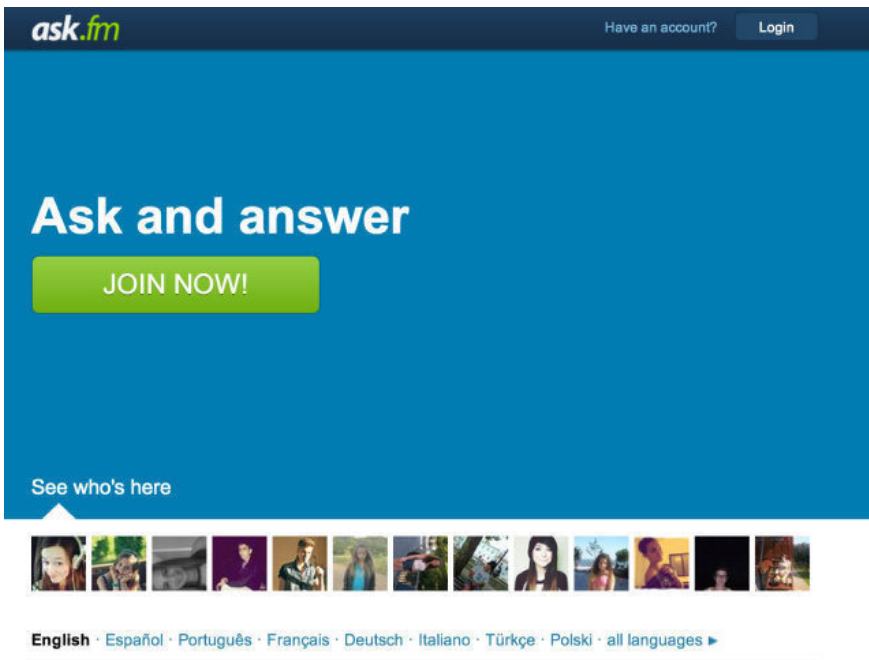
When a state Attorney General sounds a warning, it's typically in response to a history of trouble that doesn't look to take a turn in the right direction any time soon. That's what occasioned the recent big "BEWARE" and "WATCH OUT" that Maryland Attorney General Douglas Gansler issued regarding the increasingly popular social networking site, Ask.fm. Gansler's appeal included a request to advertisers, as he urged them to stop spending their marketing budget on Ask.fm banner ads. Gansler wrote, "This website is putting children at risk. A growing number of children under 13 use Ask.fm because it makes no meaningful effort to limit underage access, and these kids are being exposed to malicious anonymous postings, including racial slurs, sexual references, drug use, and personal assaults."

Are Gansler and others in the growing army of Ask.fm critics over-reacting? Or should parents, youth workers, educators and others who care about kids echo his warnings and encourage kids to stay away from Ask.fm? If the families of the nine known young suicide victims who took their lives after being anonymously harassed and bullied on Ask.fm had their way, the social networking site would shrivel up and go away.

Ask.fm is one of a number of social networking sites that have gone viral and gained a fast-growing following among teenagers and young adults who are migrating off of Facebook and other sites where their parents are increasingly showing up. Launched in Latvia in June of 2010, Ask.fm is the brainchild of brothers Ilja and Mark Terebin. After gaining popularity in Europe, Ask.fm quickly went global, with several hundred thousand new users accessing the site each and every day. While most users fall into the 13 to 25 year-old age bracket (half of all Ask.fm users are under the age of 18), a large number of young users skirt the 13-year-old age limit, lying about their age when they register.

The site's novel approach to social networking has created a niche for a type of online communication that's especially alluring to teenagers. The app is centered around posting questions and answers, which are many times asked and answered anonymously. Users can post questions that run the gamut from the benign to the harmful, with many reflecting nothing more than adolescent curiosity in a fun manner ("What's your favorite \_\_\_\_\_?" or "Do you like \_\_\_\_\_?"). But the site has been the target of criticism for becoming a place where the subject and tone of questions and answers reflect the darker side of

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the human condition and the demise of cultural standards. Questions like “Have you ever thought about killing yourself?”, “Why are you so ugly?”, and “Why are you such a slut?” spark accusatory and abusive responses including all kinds of name-calling and bullying. Add to this ability to post hurtful words the ability to post explicit and compromising videos and photos, and Ask.fm has become a dangerous and hurt-filled adolescent playground. (For more detailed information on how Ask.fm works, check out the Ask.fm website review at commonsensemedia.org).

Ask.fm’s popularity has been fueled by several factors. First, it is largely parent-free. Consequently, it serves as one of those “private uncontrolled spaces” where teens choose to congregate in the absence of adults. There are no POS (Parents Over Shoulder) watching, criticizing, or controlling your every move. Second, Ask.fm is accountability-free. Even when posters choose to bypass anonymity and reveal their true identity, there is usually nobody in authority there to set boundaries or call you out with the threat of consequences. And third, the site is anonymous. By hiding behind the veil of anonymity, the usually-timid kids are more prone to say and do whatever they want. Anonymity lowers and erases adolescent social inhibitions.

There are several reasons why we should be encouraging or requiring our kids to stay away from or leave the Ask.fm app.

First, while the site has the potential to be a positive place where kids can gather and have relatively innocent fun, it has quickly morphed into a gathering place that is highly toxic in nature. Many teenagers enter Ask.fm knowing that it’s a place to participate in anonymous nastiness and incivility. In fact, they go there with the intention of anonymously pounding others with criticism, harassment, and hate messages. Users receive virtual “bloody-noses” that can leave them reeling as they don’t know what hit them. Stepping onto the Ask.fm “playground” is risky business.

Second, Ask.fm fuels the growing spirit of incivility that exists in today’s youth culture. In fact, it has gotten so bad, that Ask.fm is taking some small steps to make the “report” button more prominent so that users can report those who engage in bullying and harassment. Still, critics accurately protest that these measures will not and cannot be effective.

Third, Ask.fm facilitates and amplifies adolescent drama that used to mostly be confined to the hours and location of the school building. Now, the drama extends into an online world void of adults that is open for business 24/7. As a result, the protections that kept kids safe and once-fostered healthy resilience are absent. Virtual mobs can gang up on and destroy vulnerable “targets” who are real, feeling, flesh and blood peers. Ask.fm is like a virtual “Lord of the Flies” where peers make and enforce the “rules.”

Fourth, Ask.fm has become a place where users can be anonymously abusive and threatening. They can post comments, photos, and videos that are explicitly sexual and profane.

Finally, Ask.fm provides an easy, almost boundary-less (very few controls and privacy-settings) path to destroying young lives. As mentioned before, no fewer than nine adolescent suicides have been linked to the barrage of bullying that was perpetrated on the social networking site. No doubt, these are complex stories with many variables at work. But Ask.fm has played a role.

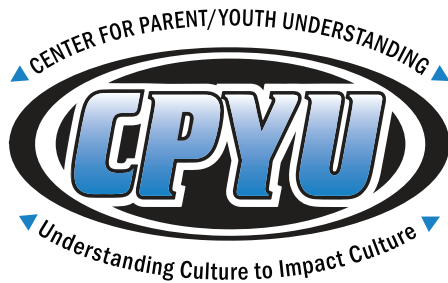
Sadly, Ask.fm reflects the fact that our kids are living in a world that is void of a moral compass. In addition, it maps out for impressionable young Ask.fm users a manner of living and

relating that is highly destructive. What happens on Ask.fm becomes normalized behavior and an example of not only the way the world *is*, but the way the world *should be*.



While Ask.fm is not inherently evil or destructive in its structure, it has morphed in a direction that has made it especially conducive to misuse. Consequently, Ask.fm is a place where kids of any age *don't* belong. Because Ask.fm has turned into a social network marked by brash incivility, it's a place to avoid. We recommend that you steer the kids you know and love away from Ask.fm.

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For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at [www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org).

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