

# Parents Guide to MXit



## Parent's Guide

Updated on 8 November 2006

Researched and Written by Ramon Thomas

Please share this document as widely as possible. There are many people concerned about children's addiction to MXit and many parents feel powerless because they do not understand the technology. This guide is free and not for sale. Send all feedback to [mxit@netucation.co.za](mailto:mxit@netucation.co.za)

To book the Ramon Thomas for a public talk anywhere in South Africa on "Online Safety" please call 0829407137.

## Introduction

I suppose most of you have heard of MXit, and that's why you are reading this e-book. Before going on to explain any details about it, I want to make one thing absolutely clear: I do not work for [MXit Lifestyle \(Pty\) Ltd](#); I am not advocating or promoting MXit; I am not trying to convert anyone to become a MXit user or convince you that it is good or bad.

Now then, after that's been said I hope your mind is at rest. Let me give you first of all some historical information about chatting online. People first started chatting online as far back as 1988 when Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was introduced and it still remains popular today. The rise of instant messaging (IM) has been spectacular with current estimates placing active users worldwide at close to 200 million. MXit is a IM application that runs on your cell phone (and PC versions are available), which allows for real-time chatting in one-on-one conversation or inside chat rooms, at a fraction of SMS costs.

It's a sad world we live in when you have cases like Mark Foley<sup>1</sup>, a American senator, who wrote legislation to protect children from online predators and turns out to be one himself. You can find the full transcripts of these conversations between senator Mark Foley and some of his under-age victims on the Internet. So many of the people around him seemed to have turned a blind eye because he is such a powerful figure in Washington DC.

In South Africa there has been a storm of negative publicity and some positive as well around MXit. Maybe the most significant so far in South Africa of the abuse of young children through a technological medium, is the case of a 16-year old girl abducted by a 33-year old man she met on MXit chatroom,<sup>2</sup> which has hastened the release of this *Parents Guide to MXit*.

I trust this guide will shed some light on this amazing technological innovation that originated in Stellenbosch, near Cape Town. As a long-time technologist, and Internet user since 1993, I greatly admire the achievement of the people behind MXit, to bring cheaper and easier access the online world to more South Africans. MXit as a tool truly blurs difference between Internet and mobile worlds because you are simply living in a connected world when you own a cellphone or a PC with Internet access. And for those who are "online" new ways of communicating, new ways of interacting and engaging with known or unknown people open up.

Responsible use of technology will become a greater issue in the future as we give up more of our personal freedoms to allow automation by computers and other forms of technology to "make our lives easier." Send all feedback to [mxit@netucation.co.za](mailto:mxit@netucation.co.za)

## Quick Reference – Don't Do This on MXit or Internet

- x Never give out your cellphone number, full name or physical address to strangers
- x Never meet a stranger from a chat room in real life
- x Never abuse other people in chat rooms (how would you feel if it was you that's on the receiving end)

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1 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Foley\\_scandal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Foley_scandal)

2 <http://www.pretorianews.co.za/index.php?fArticleId=3491256>

## What is MXit?

When you understand MXit you will be able to take appropriate action. It was developed by a company based in Stellenbosch, MXit Lifestyle (Pty) Ltd. The services was launched in late 2005 and spread by word of mouth because of several factors including “coolness factor”, very cheap compared to SMS costs, interactive environment, virtual community, freedom to express themselves.

Numerous media articles in You, Huisegenoot, many different newspapers, a feature on MNET's Carte Blanche and others have caused even more interest in children wanting to find out what all the hype is about. And its not just hype because MXit has some real benefits for users.

### MXit benefits:

- ✓ It's free to download, and free to register meaning no monthly fees.
- ✓ You can send messages back and forth in real-time (instant message)
- ✓ One-on-one messages are completely free and inside chat rooms cost 2c per message
- ✓ The maximum length of these messages are 2048 characters compared to normal SMS at 160 characters
- ✓ Save substantially on SMS costs

Currently it has about 2 million users, the majorities which are between 12-17 and smaller group between 18-25. As more and more people become MXit users, the social impact will increase and the variety of new benefits and dangers will appear. My personal philosophy with technology or most things in life is that you cannot have the good without the bad. And prevention is always better then cure. Education becomes the key to curbing the trend to growing dangers for children online and using mobile phones. This guide is the starting point of my personal campaign to bring more awareness to online safety in South Africa.

My approach is guided by the principles of one of my favorite authors, Stephen Covey who said in his magnificent book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: “Seek first to understand, before being understood.” So this guide is to help you understand both sides of the spectrum on MXit.

The bad publicity during September and October has not slowed down the growth of MXit. MXit claims current growth is 10,000 new users per day. This should increase as we are heading into December, normally a time of the year when SMS volumes sky-rocket.

### My list of MXit dangers include:

- x Addiction
- x Abuse (cyber-bullying)
- x Exploitation by Sexual Predators
- x Unregulated chat rooms

MXit has also received some very positive publicity and I recommend this article “MXit Chat

Class” on Financial Mail<sup>3</sup>'s website. So you can consider the benefits this may have for all South Africans.

## **My Personal MXit Story**

Let me take you back to December 2005 when an acquaintance of mine first mentioned this MXit thing which allows dirt cheap chatting on cell phones. And he was going to try it out and let me know because we are both technology junkies and early adopters.

A few months went by before I eventually downloaded and installed it on my Nokia 6230i. The next step was for me to register, but I got stuck with some error message and just moved on. Then in April 2006 I spent a week in Uitenhage, visiting my mom and 18 year old sister. She spent the entire week on MXit, from when she got home after school to late in the evenings. Even after she switched her bedroom light off she kept chatting on MXit, and how did I know it? Well, it has a very distinctive beep when messages are received, so I knew what was going on.

Upon returning to Johannesburg I sorted out my registration and started adding some friends whom was also using MXit. And I started to experiment with the chat rooms. Just observing and asking the odd question here and there. So far I've never met a stranger from a MXit chat room in person.

What has become clear to me is that boys and girls, men and women are exchanging very personal information about themselves in the MXit chat rooms. They have no regard for their own privacy and ignore the warning messages of not exchanging personal information. And there is nothing that can be done here. What I do like is the fact that it is a self-regulated environment where other users can vote off a person who causes disruptions or uses profanities. Many words of which are blocked by default inside MXit chat rooms.

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3 <http://free.financialmail.co.za/06/1006/cover/coverstory.htm>

## How MXit & the Internet Impact Relationships

MXit blurs the line of what is meant to be online. It used to mean being on the Internet, but with technologies like GPRS and applications like MXit your cell phone essentially puts you in the online world. In their ground breaking book, *Online and Personal*, the authors Jo Lamble & Sue Morris, describe in detail the impact of the Internet on Relationships. Much of this applies to MXit.

**The Good** – MXit allows for people who know each other to connect on a medium that is a common place, your cell phone. You can communicate easily and very cheaply. Inside the chat rooms you can meet like-minded people and share your experiences with them if you choose to do so. And you can communicate instantly and in an interactive environment. One of the biggest benefits is certainly that it allows you to stay in touch with people you already know.

**The Bad** – Communications on the Internet, using emails and MXit can become depersonalised. As you know many people do not bother calling you on Christmas or your birthday because it's easier, quicker (and cheaper) to send an SMS. The same can be said for people who use MXit. So what may happen is that children or teenagers will keep more in contact with friends who are using MXit, and less with those who do not. Much of the niceties of social interaction are often overlooked. Teenagers have developed their own 'lingua franca'. Please visit this website for a detailed list of SMS and Chat abbreviations being used by teenagers on their cell phones, MXit and the Internet: <http://www.phelios.com/sd/archives/sept04.html>

I recommend that you communicate with your children about their online activities whether cellphone or Internet. Try to understand why they enjoy it so much. When I was interviewed on 702 in September 2006, one parent made one of the best suggestions I've heard recently. They asked their child to install MXit on their cell phone so they, the parents could also communicate on MXit with them. So before closing yourself off to the benefits of MXit, and exclusively focusing on the dangers, consider using it to communicate with your children and experience it for a while before taking drastic action.

### **Its a True story: your child must be aware.**

Equally important, MXit users can help the police track paedophiles and this can be done by close co-operation between the police and the MXit team. Recently, "We will do whatever it takes to get these guys off the streets. We are prepared to work very closely with the police, and one of my senior managers will get in contact with the police to see what can be done," Herman Heunis, the founder and chief executive of MXit, told *The Star* on Wednesday October 19th.

A 33 years old man allegedly abducted a 16 years old girl whom he met in the MXit chartroom, due to exchanging personal information such as home address. While walking with her Sister in Springs, her chartroom friend recognised and dragged her into the car and flee to Randfonteing where he held the girl for five days. Luckily she managed to escape to the nearby house at Carletonville to call the police. It was reported that, the girl told detectives that she had met the man on MXit. Using this information, the police went through her cell phone records, and a sting operation was put into place using MXit. A detective went on to the service and contacted the man, pretending to be a teenage girl. The man was caught and sent to jail after appearing in the Spring's magistrate court on 24 October.

Our repeated attempts to get the latest on the case was not successful.

## How Mxit & the Internet becomes an Addiction

Modern technology is certainly very useful but can be devastating if utilised incorrectly. The problem with online addiction is that it's so easy to become addicted. Teenagers in particular are prone to highs and lows because is this peculiar in between stage of life. They are not young children any more and not adults either. Francesco Alberoni tells us "it is no coincidence that falling in love happens especially to young people, so insecure and often times embarrassed or ashamed of themselves as they are."

Addiction normally refers to a type of obsessive behaviour where the person, addicted, tries to get the same "highs" by using something more, and more. Some experts suggest about 6% of all Internet users are addicted. Now you can likely say that a similar percentage, if not more, of cell phone users are addicted to their trusty sidekicks. It does not sound like much but when you realise there are more than 1 billion Internet users world wide (4 million in South Africa) and over 2.5 billion cell phone users (about 30 million in South Africa). Even if we do not take 6% and rather consider the 3% found in a South African Internet addiction study by Dr Andrew Thatcher, a Psychologist from WITS University, the numbers are still staggering:

- approximately 120,000 South African Internet users
- and 900,000 cell phone users
- My estimate for Mxit users = approximately 60,000 of them are addicted.

The definitive work on Internet or Online addiction is by Dr Kimberly Young from the Centre for Internet Addiction. I highly recommend this selection of online addiction tests presented by Dr Young here: <http://www.netaddiction.com/resources/iaindex.htm>

## References, Resources, Further Reading

The following websites were used as a source of information for this guide:

- Why Muslim Youth's Are Addicted To The Cellphone?
- MXIT Forum <http://forum.mxit.co.za>
- The MXit Blog (not linked with company): <http://www.mxit.iblog.co.za/>

I highly recommend the following websites for concerned parents and teachers in South Africa:

- SafeKids.com: <http://www.safekids.com>
- WiredSafety: <http://www.wiredsafety.com>
- Yahoooligans Parents Guide: <http://yahooligans.yahoo.com/parents/>
- MSN Kids, Stay safe online: <http://www.msn.co.za/security/family/>
- Child Line: Call 08000 55555 or visit <http://www.childline.org.za>

Laisser-Faire Parenting (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Trust the Teenager)

- <http://www.namastecafe.com/evolution/indigo/worry.htm>

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To book Ramon for a public talk at your school, church or company on “Online Safety” please call 0829407137 or via email on [ramon@ramonthomas.com](mailto:ramon@ramonthomas.com)

A Internet enthusiast since 1993, Ramon Thomas is an visionary with an uncanny knack for spotting global online trends and translating them into meaningful insights in South Africa. His pioneering research into the Online Dating industry has positioned him as the leading expert on online behaviour in South Africa. And he's Internet Café research has established him as a authority on the local Internet industry.

Born and raised in Uitenhage, near Port Elizabeth, Ramon completed his B.Sc in Computer Science & Statistics in 1995. He is currently busy with his Masters degree in Information Science at the University of Johannesburg. Ramon has worked primarily in the Internet and banking industry in Johannesburg, Cape Town, United Kingdom and United Arab Emirates.

He founded his company NETucation in late 2003 and from 2004 started sub-contracting working in sales and marketing for Arthur Goldstuck's World Wide Worx. Ramon's various research projects has led to interviews on MNET's Carte Blanche & SEX Etc; SABC 3Talk, eTV Morning Edition, eTV News, Vicious Delicious, Talk Radio 702, Cape Talk, SAFM, Kaya FM, Sunday Independent, Style Magazine, Brainstorm, Mail & Guardian Online, Business Day, ITWeb, Men's Health SA, True Love and Cosmopolitan.

In his spare time Ramon enjoys Tai Chi, classical music, cinema, reading and sketching.

