Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley hailed an agreement yesterday between 49 state attorneys general and the popular social networking site MySpace as a "huge step" toward protecting children on the Internet.

Under the agreement, MySpace has endorsed a host of measures to shield children from inappropriate material and sexual predators who use the site.

MySpace, part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and the most popular social networking site, has pledged to develop an e-mail registry that will prevent some children from creating online profiles. Parents will be able to send their children's e-mail addresses to the registry if they do not want them to post profiles on the site.

MySpace has also agreed to strengthen software prohibiting underage users, create a high school section for users under 18, and respond within 72 hours to complaints about inappropriate content. The networking site already takes some steps to protect children, including not allowing registered sex offenders to maintain profiles.

"I think today's agreement is a huge step toward safety," Coakley said in a news conference after the agreement was announced in New York City by attorneys general from Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. "This model of virtually all the attorneys general in the country agreeing with an industry to adopt these principles is, I think, unusual and a good thing."

MySpace has increasingly come under scrutiny from law enforcement officials in the past two years after some young users fell prey to sexual predators who posed as minors and then set up face-to-face meetings. Some teenagers have also misused the site to post information that led to bullying of others.

"This is an industry-wide challenge, and we must all work together to create a safer Internet," MySpace's chief security officer, Hemanshu Nigam, said in a written statement.

MySpace has agreed to set up an Internet Safety Technical Task Force that will explore technologies to help make users safer, including tools to verify age.

For the agreement to work, Coakley said, parents must teach children about the dangers of social networking sites.
"We are in a brave new world on this," she said.

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