



Cyber space a portal for aggressive and sexual behavior

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02/24/2010

STERLING — There are many different dangers parents should be aware of when children use electronic communication. Cyberbullying and sexting are two of the major issues to be aware of. Those were two of the topics discussed at a “Wired for Safety” community presentation on Monday. Presenters included youth services coordinator Virgie Nelson, Sterling Police Department investigator Skyler Pimple, district attorney's office investigator Tammy Lee and RE-1 Valley School District psychologist Dr. Lois Christiansen.

Cyberbullying is bullying that happens through various forms of media, including e-mail, cell phone, text messaging, instant messaging, Web sites and others.

According to Christiansen, there are four main types of cyberbullies: The vengeful angel, who is a vigilante or protector; the power hungry, who exert authority and control; the mean girls, who do the group bullying and they do it more for entertainment; and the inadvertent, who respond without thinking.

Examples of cyberbullying or aggressive online behavior include: Insults, flaming, denigration, impersonation, exclusion, outing, trickery, luring and damaging Web sites/profiles.

Cyberbullying has many effects. Christiansen said it causes young people to lose the ability to feel empathetic. It also turns into emotional distress, school failure and avoidance, suicide and harmful retaliation.

Lee talked about one of the most notorious cyberbullying cases, out of Missouri in 2006, the “MySpace Suicide.” A woman, Lori Drew, created a fake profile of a 15-year-old boy to find out if a 13-year-old girl, Megan Meier, was saying bad things about her daughter. They started dating online and then Drew broke up with Meier and told her things like the world would be a better place without her. That led to the Meier girl committing suicide.

Right now there aren't really any laws addressing cyberbullying, but that could soon change. “I look forward to seeing some laws in Colorado and throughout the nation that are actually going to start addressing this cyberbullying,” Lee said.

Christiansen talked about things to do to prevent cyberbullying. Establish the same rules for the Internet as with people in real life.

“If you're not going to say it to someone's face, don't say it online,” she said.

Also, ensure that your child doesn't post information that could put them at risk, monitor your child's activities and use filtering and blocking.

You should also look for warning signs. Is your child having emotional distress? Are their friendships changing? Are they avoiding school? Excessive Internet use can also be a sign. When responding to a cyberbully, don't retaliate. Tell them to stop — if it's an inadvertent cyberbully, they might not realize they're hurting you that much. Also, ignore groups of cyberbullies, file a complaint and tell your child it's okay to ask for help.

Sexting is another danger of electronic communication. According to Pimple, sexting refers to sending a photo or other visual image depicting a person in the partial or total states of nudity via text message from one cell phone to another.

He talked about a sex and text survey, which surveyed 653 teens between 13 and 19 years old. Approximately 39 percent of teens surveyed said they have sent sexually explicit images, 44 percent said it's common, 38 percent said it makes dating easier and 66 percent said it's fun and flirty. Yet 75 percent said they know that it can have consequences.

Also, 51 percent felt pressured by boyfriends. Peer pressure is what can cause teens to do this.

The survey also found 22 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys said they posted nude or semi-nude pictures and 25 percent of girls and 33 percent of boys said they received messages not intended to go to them.

“As soon as you send it, you don't know who it's going to go to,” Pimple said. You don't know if the person who gets the image will distribute it to others, he said.

Parents should know that sexting has its own language. There are a variety of acronyms children or teens will use so that their parents can't understand what they're saying. For example, LMIRL stands for let's meet in real life, CD9 means Code 9-parents are watching and zerg is to gang up on someone. To see the top 50 Internet acronyms parents should know, visit www.netlingo.com/top50/acronyms-for-parents.php.

Also, if your child writes an acronym and you don't know what it means, there is a Web site that allows you to search for meanings.

Lee talked about some of the consequences sexting can have when she discussed a case that happened in Ohio. Jessica Logan, an 18-year-old, decided to send a nude photo of herself to her boyfriend, who later sent it to hundreds of youth. She was tormented about it, she started withdrawing and eventually committed suicide.

“Don't think your kid won't do that (commit suicide). You need to talk to your kid about if they would do it, if they've thought of doing it,” Lee said.

She also talked about a local case from 2008, involving a Haxtun resident, David Clark, who was a National Guardsman. He was arrested on suspicion of possessing and distributing tens of thousands of child pornography images found on National Guard computers. “This does happen anywhere,” Lee said.

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