Keep Kids Safe When Surfing

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OPP Sgt. Robyn MacEachern offers tips on Internet safety to parents during a presentation Wednesday night at Holy Cross School in Alcona.

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Do you know what your kids are watching or who they are chatting with when they're on the Internet?

Perhaps not surprisingly, a shocking percentage of parents don't, according to Det.-Sgt. Robyn MacEachern of the Youth Issues Unit, Crime Prevention Section of the OPP.

MacEachern was in town Wednesday speaking first to students at St. Francis of Assisi School and later in the day to parents of Holy Cross School students.

A study conducted by young Canadians in a Wired World article revealed more than 79 per cent of children from Grades 4 to 11 regularly access the Internet at home. And of those, almost 40 per cent reported they have their own Internet connection.

The Internet presents challenges such as inappropriate content, Web predators, online etiquette and behaviour, as well as security and safety issues. In most families, children tend to be more knowledgeable about the Internet than their parents.

 "The more adults are aware of their children's Internet use, the better able they are to help identify the risks," MacEachern said. "We can't prevent what we're not aware of. Take as many steps as you can to make it as safe as possible."

During a two-hour presentation, the 14-year OPP veteran described a variety of scenarios where young people can be tricked, or even more disturbing, willingly disclose personal and in some instances, intimate details about themselves to strangers posing as friends on the Internet.

While there are many sites suitable for children, "there are a lot of sites with no checks or balances," MacEachern says. "Kids just won't tell us when things go wrong."

While it may seem fun to post pictures or engage in immature behaviour on a web cam, these images posted on a social networking site may come back to haunt a youngster in later life, MacEachern says.

"Remember, what you put on the Internet today, stays there. Five to 10 years from now, a prospective employer may view the site while doing a background check. Then you'll never know the real reason you didn't get that job you wanted."

And children should never share their password with anyone, even their best friend, MacEachern cautions.

Police are dealing with an ever-increasing amount of cyber bullying, too, she says.

Cyber bullying is the posting of insulting or defamatory remarks about another person.

"There's not a school that hasn't been touched by Internet cyber-bullying," MacEachern says. The Ontario Ministry of Education has even made cyber bullying a suspendable offense.

Const. Judy Walker of South Simcoe Police Service attended the workshop with special Const. Karen Knowles.

South Simcoe officers go into area schools on a regular basis to speak with Grade 5 students about computer safety. They follow up with Grade 8 students as a refresher, Walker says.

"There can be a false sense of security when there's a computer at home," Walker says. "It's important kids get the same message from everybody, including parents and their teachers."

MacEachern's presentation was "very timely, given the recent 23 arrests across Ontario for child pornography. Unfortunately, I'm sure it's a just a drop in the bucket."

Helpful resources for parents include cybertip.ca, or netlingo.com, a site that translates common Internet phrases such as POS (Parent over shoulder), PAW (Parents are watching) or KPC (Keeping parents clueless).

"Kids crave our interaction and for us to be in their world," MacEachern says. "Many of them believe we're not interested in what they are doing online. I even know some parents who sleep with the computer keyboard under their pillow, to stop their kids from using the Internet in the middle of the night."

As a police officer, MacEachern says, "I respect the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* – but it won't apply in my house, with my children and the computer."

Parents' checklist.

• Computers with online access should be situated in an open, monitored area of the home.
• Have open conversations regarding online experiences. Encourage reporting of inappropriate activities and experiences online.
• Set household rules regarding online activities and safety guidelines.
• Check your computer's Internet history frequently.
• Ensure content on social networking sites and profiles does not reveal personal information such as name, age, geographic location or other contact information.
• Check 'Instant Messaging' buddy lists to make sure only people known to your child in real life are on the list.
• Activate parental controls on Internet browsers and ensure security updates are maintained. Utilize antivirus, antispyware and use a firewall for security.
• Research materials to educate both yourself, and your children, about online safety and proper Internet use. OPP detachments may provide cyber risk safety information. Contact you local detachment or visit the OPP website, Crime Prevention Section.

Information courtesy of the OPP Crime Prevention Section