



Fergus Falls Daily Journal Parents hear more on dangers of Internet

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Protecting kids from the faceless predators of cyberspace is a challenge for parents, especially if their kids are more computer savvy than they are.

"The Internet, Your Family and What You Can Do to Protect Them," was presented Tuesday by Rick Anderson. A retired commander of the St. Paul Police Department, Anderson is the commander of Minnesota/South Dakota Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. The event was sponsored by Otter Tail County CARE (Children Are the Responsibility of Everyone) Committee. Approximately 50 people held the seminar at Fergus Falls Middle School.

"The Internet is a wonderful source for our children," Anderson said. "Our children have access to all kinds of good information we didn't have as kids. The bad thing about the Internet is, think of all the grossest, sickest things you can think of. They have access to that, too. We really push parents being a part of their children's on-line lives."

The popularity and danger of social networks such as MySpace.com, Facebook and Xanga.com were discussed.

"It's very easy to be who you want to be on the Internet and that's the appeal. Social networks are not really a safe place for your kids to be socializing ... The reality of it is, the Internet isn't controllable. Kids are giving out too much information about their likes and dislikes and that makes it easier for predators to strike up a conversation and gain kids' trust."

Chat rooms are another widely-used means of socialization for kids. Chat rooms are on-line conversations between two or many people; chat rooms can be public or private. Anyone accessing a public site can read the posted responses. If your child gives out too much information, it could get into the wrong hands.

"If your kids are in chat rooms, read over their shoulder and talk with them about it," Anderson said. "About 92 percent of parents don't understand what their kids are talking about in chat rooms. Ask them what the (code words) mean. If they won't tell you, go to NetLingo.com."

Because of something called the copycat scheme, kids can be unintentionally exposed to pornography simply by mistyping or misspelling a word.

"Sloppy typing or inverting a phrase can take them to a porn site. If this happens, write down (the site address) and report it to law enforcement."

Parents are not completely helpless when it comes to keeping their children safe on the net. There is filtering software that blocks access to sites of a parent's choosing. Also available is monitoring software that records everything that has been done on your computer, allowing parents to see what their child has been doing on line.

"I'm not recommending everyone get monitoring software," Anderson said. "That's a personal choice. But do something to keep track of what your kids do on line."

Some of the things you can do include:

- 1) Put the computer out in the open in your home.

- 2) Set rules, including the sites the can visit with reasonable time limits. Visit areas such as chat rooms to
- 3) better monitor your children's use.
- 4) Talk with your kids about online dangers, that there are actual people on the other end of their correspondence. The information that person is giving could be false.
- 5) Review a use history or a run log of on-line activities to see every site recently visited on your computer.
- 6) Set up quick access bookmarks or flags for sites that are safe for kids to visit.
- 7) Teach your children to never share information about your personal life and report anyone asking personal questions.

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