

Chamber speaker: State agency offers Internet safety advice

09/28/06 by Tim Carlfeldt

Awareness is the key to keeping kids safe in their use of the Internet, an security expert told a Walker County audience this week.

At the Walker County Chamber of Commerce monthly lunch meeting Tuesday, Tod Keys, area school safety coordinator with Georgia Office of Homeland Security, offered up several facts and tips for preventing those with ill intent from preying on children via computers.

Keys, who conducts school safety and security assessments for both public and private schools in Northwest Georgia, said many kids today are very Internet-savvy, perhaps too much for their own good.

"The Internet has become an indispensable tool in our society," he said. "Unfortunately it has also become a breeding ground for predators."



Tod Keys, with Georgia office of Homeland Security

Essential steps parents should take for Internet safety:

- * Don't allow a computer in your child's bedroom. Place it in a common area of the house.
 - * Write down what is allowed as a "contract" for how/when your child can use the computer and the Internet.
 - * Know the passwords for all the areas your child accesses online.
 - * Make your child aware of the permanence of things they post online. It's forever.
 - * Choose e-mail addresses and "screen names" that don't give clues to personal information.
 - * Learn the terms your child uses in their online communication. A good source is www.netlingo.com.
-

Parents have a lot of common sense when it comes to protecting their children in the physical world, Keys pointed out, but there's often a gap when it comes to the cyberworld.

Social networking websites like MySpace.com, while now technically prohibited to those under 18, are incredibly popular among middle and high school-age kids, and popularity is gauged by how many other users one has on their "buddy list."

"I've asked students at the schools I go, 'Do you know these people?' They might be wary of a stranger on the street, but online it's a big open party," Keys said. "And when they get online, people often have a tendency to divorce themselves from who they are in the real world."

And such anonymity makes for an especially effective environment for criminals like child predators to pursue their prey.

In condensing what is normally a 2½-hour program down to 30 minutes for the Chamber meeting, Keys ran through a scenario that demonstrated just how easy it can be to gather personal information using the Internet.

With just the information of a young girl's e-mail address, Keys showed how simple steps could yield the girl's full name & address, the school she attends and possible times that she may be home alone — "all of that in less than 15 minutes."

The good news is that law enforcement officers are keeping up with the technology in order to catch such predators, and through programs like the one Keys presents, kids and parents can be educated about how to avoid trouble through a computer.

"Regardless of how it often seems, kids want their parents to be involved and to guide them in their Internet experience," he said. "So it's important that moms and dads are up-to-date on what's out there."

Tod Keys will travel to give his full presentation on Internet safety training, emergency operation planning, bomb threat management, and weapons screening to any group free of charge. He can be reached via e-mail at tkeys@gema.state.ga.us or by phone at (706) 621-1190.