



Bullies, Predators Find Home Online

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— The age of the Internet presents a wealth of opportunities for people of all ages, whether it be instant news updates, access to obscure recordings from a favorite artist or simply the ease of communication among friends.

But with that access — to information and other people — comes a darker element: Those who use the Web to advance their own biases, or worse, their damaging intentions. Among the major issues are the anonymous harassment of others through the Internet, called cyber-bullying, and predators who use chat rooms, message boards and networking sites such as MySpace to lure children into graphic conversations and sometimes face-to-face sexual encounters, said Curtis Sliwa, founder and president of the Guardian Angels and Cyber Angels, a volunteer public safety and educational program that deals with the use of the Internet.

“Cyber-bullying is mushrooming,” he said. “Because when you can do it anonymously, you can spread rumors, innuendo, harass people or just stress them out, just by working at your terminal in front of your computer screen.”

Cyber predators are an issue for school districts, especially since their patrons are the usual victims.

In the City and Town of Tonawanda, schools are still learning how to handle and teach against the threat. Several messages to the North Tonawanda school district were not returned.

From sixth to eighth grade, children in the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District have 10 weeks of computer classes for 40 minutes a day. Out of that time, about a week and a half is spent on Internet safety.

Instruction on cyber-bullying begins in sixth grade.

“The big issue is kids forget that’s a human being on the other side of the computer,” said Joseph Leone, curriculum and learning specialist of business and computers for the district.

In seventh grade, the major focus is on copyright infringement, illegal downloading, piracy, filesharing and peer-to-peer networking, Leone said. Seventh grade also is when students get into MySpace, he said, and so the district has students create fake MySpace pages and instruct them on how to protect from predators.

“We’re finding out that the majority of kids are wiser than we thought,” he said. “We also have open discussion on how many of you have had someone request a chat who you didn’t know.”

Eighth grade is where the majority of discussion about predators occurs, Leone said.

Students shoot skits on the dangers of Internet predators and watch videos from i-SAFE, a Web site which trains parents and children about the dangers of predators.

In the City of Tonawanda School District, cyber-bullying is a focus from sixth grade all the way up to eighth.

“It’s probably more significant in some ways than face-to-face bullying, because you don’t have to be big to do it,” said Frank Pirrone, technology integrator for the district. “But you don’t have as much potential for harm.”

Students in the district are taught Internet safety through the DARE program and its health classes, Pirrone said.

Teachers also instruct the students informally on the dangers of revealing personal information and trusting sites that look authentic but are actually vehicles for anti-social information, he said. (One such site is MartinLutherKing.org, which portrays itself as historically accurate site while promoting anti-King, anti-Jewish rhetoric).

The district also has students and parents sign an acceptable use policy, which attempts to make sure everyone knows what’s safe and what isn’t, Pirrone said. Every single computer is protected by a firewall system that keeps out inappropriate sites, he said.

A 10-member committee, including a representative from each district and library media specialists, formulate policy suggestions on Internet safety, Pirrone said. If those suggestions are approved by the school board, they become part of the district’s curriculum.

In the Ken-Ton district, the curriculum is still evolving, Leone said. But there is one major component he hopes to implement by the school year’s end.

“Our main goal is to get kids to become instructors at the lower grade levels,” he said.

“Because if a kid is teaching it, and he can go and teach others about it, that really shows that they’ve learned.”