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COMMUNICATION

Teens say they need help fending off cyberbullies

barbara F. meltz

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Students at Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Mass., organized an Internet Safety Club this year. They want middle-school students to be more aware of the dangers to be found on the Internet. They also want parents to pay more attention.

"Kids are getting trashed on-line, and parents don't even know it," says co-founder Lauren Krone, a senior.

Think about this: Teenagers are telling parents to get more involved.

Think about this too; In a recent national poll of 20,000 students in grades five through 12 and their parents, one-third of the students said they do not have any rules at home for Internet use, yet 92 percent of parents said they do. The survey was conducted by i-SAFE, a California-based nonprofit organization that promotes Internet safety education.

It's not that people are lying. More likely, it's a matter of perception.

Perhaps parents aren't addressing the critical online activity, or they think they are done once they've bought parental-control software. But even software companies say nothing substitutes for hands-on involvement, from eyeballing what's on the screen to teaching their children how to evaluate a site, from providing netiquette (that's Internet etiquette for the uninitiated) to identifying red-flag behavior.

Perhaps the biggest reason parents are clueless is that even the technology-sawy fail to grasp that children use the Internet differently than they do.

"Adults go online to get information," says Jonathan King of i-SAFE (i-safe.com).

"Children go online to socialize."

Being connected to friends is important, and the Internet is a terrific way to do it.

Increasingly, though, socializing is fraught with danger. That's what Lauren's club wants parents to know.

"Online fighting and bullying are huge," Lauren says.

Parents tend to think that chat-room predators are a child's biggest online threat. But instant messaging has gained in popularity, and that has spawned cyberbullying.

"The growing threat is no longer from strangers but from people students know — class-mates — who use online venues such as instant message or bulletin boards to embarrass, humiliate or otherwise harass," says Kathy Merlock Jackson, Batten professor of communication at Virginia Wesleyan College.

Her area of specialty is children's culture. Katya Gifford of cyberangels.org, an Internet safety organization that offers free, online safety classes for parents, says bullying has become a huge problem in the past year.

It often starts innocently, says Dana Hall junior Allie Levy, also an Internet Safety Club member.

"You could say in person to someone, 'You're so stuck up!' and they would know you're teasing," Allie says. "But when it's in print, you don't know how to read it, so maybe you respond by saying something that's mean."

"The next thing you know, a printout is being passed around:

'Look what she said about me,'" Lauren says.

From there, it's a matter of bad luck how far it spreads and how vicious it gets. Lauren says that boys and girls are just as likely to be bullies as bullied. A student can be "stalked" with nasty in-stant messages, cell-phone text messages or a Web page of em-barrassing photos taken, say, in the locker room.

"Everybody has had it hap-pen," says Ally Carolan, a Dana Hall junior.

But it's worse in middle school because kids are desperate to fit in, she says. That makes them more likely to divulge personal information online and to be more devastated if details later are used against them. They also tend not to have the tools to cope.

"Something as simple as put-ting JK [just kidding] or a smiley face" on a comment that might be misconstrued," Ally says.

That's where parents should come in, Lauren says.

Cyber rules

Here are netiquette tips for, children and parents;

Never forward a mes-sage from someone unless you have that person's per-mission.

Don't use all capitals, es-pecially in a chat room. (It's considered rude and can result in someone tracking you and harassing you.)

Don't use language you wouldn't speak.

Don't use terminology or icons unless you know what they mean.

Negotiate rules on in-stant messaging. Only after homework is done? Be-tween subjects? Ten min-. utes ata time? An hour to-tal?

If your child is the victim of cyberbullying or any un-wanted material, don't de-lete it.

Contact the school or the police. 1-safe.org and cyberangels.org are also good resources.

By now, most parents know basic instant-message abbrevia-tions, such as LOL (laugh out loud) or JK (just kid-ding). Here are some up-dates: PAW (parents are watching), KOTL (kiss on the lips), NIFOC (naked in front of the computer), OLL (online love), ASL (age/sex/location), usually used as a question and WUF (where are you from?).

— *Barbara F. Meltz*