

Since returning from winter break, Mr. Anderson and I have conducted monthly class meetings for our 5th and 6th grade students to help prepare them for middle school. This month's topic is *Internet Safety & Cyberbullying*; I invited Stefanie Thomas of the Seattle Police Department, to share about social media, cyberbullying and staying safe on the internet. The class meeting was held on April 16th. Prior to the student meeting, I invited parents to attend an evening parent workshop with Thomas to help parents navigate through the challenges of social media in the pre-teen and teen years.

According to the Kaiser Foundation, kids spend almost eight hours a day on some sort of electronic gadget. Thomas shared that 76% of teenagers say digital abuse is a serious problem and 56% of teens admit to being victims of cyber abuse. Thomas shared that cyberbullying is a problem for teenagers in high school, but seems to grow exponentially in the middle school years. Girls tend to participate more in cyberbullying among peers and boys tend to tease others about sexual orientation "just to be funny." Students engage in cyberbullying for a number of reasons: attention, approval, reputation, anger, boredom, bonding, loneliness.

She talked about examples such as a Seattle middle school male student who wanted to collect as many Facebook friends as possible. This student befriended a person claiming to be a 13-year-old girl. Within a short time, dozens of the student's friends also friended this girl because they now had a mutual friend in common. The 13-year-old girl was actually a 22-year-old sex offender.

It is important for students and parents to know that most often, the police investigate these kinds of cases with sophisticated software tools and they sometimes will collect digital evidence that has been erased or hidden. Even though you or your student have erased or deleted information, it is still possible for the content to be retrieved. It is important to note, which Facebook states in their fine print, that they have ownership of all content, posts and pictures that someone posts and Facebook may look through the archives if needed.

If you become aware of cyberbullying or harassment, Thomas suggests that you print a copy of the offending page or take a digital picture of a text message. She suggests that you report concerns to the principal if the bully attends the same school. You should keep documentation of all contact with the school and attempts to contact the other parents. She suggests that you report to the police department if there is continued harassment, threats to hurt/kill, or sexually motivated harassment.

It is important to listen to your children. Victims often don't want to report because of fear of retaliation, fear of the cyberbullying getting worse, or unfortunately, some think that they deserve it. Pay attention in carpools or when your child is around friends, what information are they sharing to indicate which sites they are visiting or who they are talking with online. Thomas suggests if your child is engaged in social media, that the parent has the child's password and is a "friend" on the site. Be aware of your child's online activity.

Thomas also warned against posting personal information on social media sites. She used examples to explain that when someone in your family announces vacation plans or leaving for the airport, you have given knowledge that you are not at home during that time. Thomas cautioned parents and students about giving too much information online (birth date, locations around your home, children's school name, etc.), and she advised that everyone should question the purpose of their posts before they publish them.

On the Blackwell website, in the tab "Counselor News", I have posted the handouts that Thomas gave to parents at the evening event. Most adults are not familiar with the websites that young people are using. Within these sites, students are talking to strangers on webcams, posting "anonymous" cruel things about peers, interacting with others that one cannot be 100% positive of the identity of that person. The handouts give parents more detailed information about Facebook, a list of current "hot" sites for teens and also a list of websites that help parents stay up-to-date these sites.

I hope you find this information helpful. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

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