

Cyber Bullying and Internet Safety

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In a time far long gone, kids used to yell out to their parents “I’m going out to play” and would go outside to play with friends, ride their bike, sometimes several blocks to a friend’s house and as long as they were home by dark, most parents did not worry too much. That time is long gone, the world has shrunk and now our children are exposed to more things that are hazardous, so much more then we ever were and now they don’t even have to leave the safety of their home to be victimized or bullied.

The Internet is a good tool, providing us access to a wealth of knowledge, keeping us in touch with family and friends, online shopping and much more. It is also a very dangerous place for our children who can be exposed to sexual predators and bullying. The problem is serious; a study found that 71% of teens ages 13-17 reported receiving online messages from someone they did not know, 40% reported that they reply and chat with that person and only 18% of those would tell an adult. 45% of teen’s report that they have been asked personal information from someone they don’t know, 30% considered meeting someone they have chatted with online and 14% have actually had an encounter.

Online predators target anybody, using information gathered from online chat rooms, blogs or social networking sites. They will pose younger than they are to gain trust, provide a sympathetic ear and offer praise, gifts and other things that the teens desire. The predator’s ultimate goal is to get a face to face meeting, avoiding all contact with parents since a proactive parent is a shield to predators.

Cyberbullies use chat rooms, instant messaging, texts, social networking sites with messages and sometimes video and pictures to embarrass, threaten or intimidate a child. This technology allows the bully to spread gossip or lies; distribute embarrassing pictures or videos to a wide audience while remaining anonymous. It may start out as a joke but once it is launched into the cyberspace of the Internet it has serious and even tragic consequences.

There are some warning signs that parents can look for; the child withdraws from family and friends, isolating themselves and spending more and more time online. The child may hide or turn off the screen when a parent enters the room, you find pornography on the computer and your phone or their phone has calls to unknown numbers. In bullying situations, parents should look for children avoiding school, being withdrawn or a sudden interest or avoidance of the computer. Many children do not report to their parent’s difficult online situations out of fear of being embarrassed or thinking they did something wrong.

There are several things that parents can do to watch out for their children’s online activity and to safeguard them. The first and foremost thing is to talk openly to your child and be available to answer questions they may have and let them know that they can feel safe coming to you with a online problem, whether it be unwanted contact from an unknown person or harassing messages

from a known source. Let them know the Internet is full of people that pretend to be anyone and that there are people out there with bad intentions. Place the computer in an open area in the home so that parents can monitor the child's online activity. Use a filtering software, web browser control, key stroke software and monitor the Internet history. There are several free and pay software programs out there that can help parents watch the child's activity, many run in the background and are never able to be seen by the user. Parents should become educated about computers, the Internet, social media, online language, cell phone capabilities and cell phone usage plans. Get involved in their online life, ask questions, set reasonable expectations and boundaries and be supportive but if they do something inappropriate, punish them in an appropriate and manner equal to the action.

If your child becomes a cyberbully victim from a fellow student or former student, inform the school and if the school has one, the School Resource Officer. You should also save any messages in case you need the proof later, you should change your child's email and online accounts, contact the web site or Internet Service Provider for assistance in removing the offending pictures, videos or messages. If needed, contact the police department if there are threats or harassment and in some cases get an injunction from a court preventing contact.

There is a lot of information out there on this subject and most of what I teach on this subject is gathered from the Arizona Attorney Generals Office, (www.azag.gov), Arizona Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, (www.azicac.org) and ChildhelpUSA (www.childhelpusa.org). Links to these and other websites can also be found at www.phoenix.gov/police.

I know this article is a bit longer than most I write but I think this topic is one that some people do not give enough thought to and in our ever-changing world, we as parents and adults need to be involved and up to date on what is out there. If anyone has any questions about this or any other topic, please feel free to call me at 602-495-5238 or by email at tim.mitten@phoenix.gov. Thank you for all that everyone does in partnering with us to improve your neighborhood and to improve the quality of life in the City of Phoenix.