

New Canaan News

Cyber Safety: Communication Key Component

By Larissa Lytwyn

October 16, 2008

Since the Internet has become a daily necessity, many parents have become increasingly wary of its impact. "When there's a lot of new technology getting easier to use and access all the time, it's natural to feel concerned," said Rob Miller, New Canaan's Director of Information and Communication Technologies.

Last spring a 31-year-old Oklahoma man posing as a 17-year-old was arrested near New Canaan High School after attempting to meet a student on campus. The incident resulted in a June memo from Superintendent David Abbey on the importance of cyber safety.

"As a community, we count on each other for protection and care, especially when it comes to the safety of our children," Abbey said in the statement. He urged parents to take "an active role" in discussing "the responsibilities and vulnerabilities associated with Internet use."

Miller said last spring's incident was an excellent example of Internet dangers — as well as the how a good support system can mitigate an unsafe situation. "The student's friends approached school authorities about what was happening," Miller said. "Everyone worked together."

Deputy Superintendent Mary Kolek said New Canaan parents were historically "proactive" in their children's schools. Basic cyber safety tenets, such as restricting the release of personal information and refraining from chatting with strangers online, are integrated into computer class curriculum beginning in elementary school. "We keep our content simple and age appropriate," Kolek said.

In situations of cyber-conflict, she continued, families are brought in to discuss the situation. "We take concerns seriously and take action accordingly," Kolek said. Documented evidence, such as an instant messaging correspondence, is helpful to illustrate the scope and nature of the situation.

Youth Services Director Tony Phillips said cyber-bullying was a lot like teasing on the playground — only that playground is now cyberspace. The virtual nature of the online medium, he said, can make users more aggressive than they would be face-to-face, making real-time consequences potentially more severe.

Last spring's incident, he said, was a textbook example. Additionally, the emergence of social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and more recently Twitter, allow users to be extremely self-revealing. "The tween and teen years are a time of self-discovery," he said.

Facebook and MySpace allow users to share their hometown, current residence, school, interests and hobbies. "These sites can allow teens to be exactly who they are, or create an image of who they would like to be," Phillips said. "It can be a source of validation." He encouraged parents to create their own profiles to share the online experience with their children.

"There are a lot of safety features allowing users to set their profiles to private and limit the amount of personal information they reveal," he said. "By making their own profiles, parents can better understand how the sites work." Further, he added, parents can advise their children on the dangers of risky online behaviors like posting suggestive pictures.

Miller agreed. A predominant theme of the family cyber-safety workshop he hosted last month was the use of open communication in lieu of restriction. "Technology has become an intrinsic facet of everyday

modern life," he said. "Banning these tools and resources can have the opposite effect from what parents are looking to accomplish."

He strongly recommends keeping computers in open spaces like the living room, even for older teens. "Obviously, this can be more challenging as kids get older," Miller said. "But it creates an element of trust. There's nothing to hide."

The building of trust is vital as children are allowed cell phones, virtually all of which now come with cameras and text messaging. "This an ongoing challenge," Miller said. While younger children can be given phones with preset numbers and numerous features restricting online use, older children are apt to use their cell phones as part of daily life. Suddenly parents monitoring PCs in the kitchen can't be privy to the moment their child receives an inappropriate text at school.

A growing trend is relationship abuse through technology. A 2007 survey of more than 1,000 teens on Internet use sponsored by Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) found a disturbing disconnect between what teens were experiencing and what they were willing to tell their parents. Nearly one out of three teens reported their partner had texted them 10, 20 or 30 times an hour to find out what they were doing, who they were with or where they were.

A quarter revealed they had been called names, harassed or put down by their partner through texting. One in five said they had been asked through texts or the Internet to engage in sexual activity when they did not want to. Nearly one in five also said their partner had used a cell phone or the Internet to spread rumors about them.

Miller advised parents to review cell phone bills carefully. "Parents should know who is contacting their children and how often," he said. Many carriers provide text messaging blocks.

"The key is not turning away from the technology itself, but using it wisely," he said. Miller is currently obtaining his Doctoral of Education (EdD) from Northcentral University, an accredited online university based in Prescott Valley, Ariz. The basis of his thesis is integrating responsible Internet use in the classroom, including even social networking sites.

"There are a lot of social sites directed more and more toward objectives like social justice," he said. Such sites, like TakingItGlobal.org, and even Facebook, allow users to raise interest and money in support of various social and political causes. "We need to work with technology and learn from it together," he said.