

INTERNET AWARENESS FOR STUDENTS



by Jeannette Picard, MMSA Secretary

“No more victims!” This is the mantra and goal of Thomas Lawler, who spoke at MMS on April 14th, and his team of FBI agents dealing with internet threats for students in Connecticut. Based in New Haven, the team has identified a number of problems which can affect our children as they surf the internet and join chat rooms or gaming sites. These include:

- Anonymous predators
- Pornography
- Violence
- Hateful speech
- Dangerous acts
- Bullies
- Child predators

Those most at risk include unsupervised teens, those who are naïve and trusting, and those who are not aware of threats. Agent Lawler explained that predators find their victims in a number of ways and use social networks like Facebook, gaming sites, AOL or Yahoo messenger to develop trusting relationships with kids. Mr. Lawler noted that they “win trust” in order to “groom the child” - all in an atmosphere that many parents assume to be safe. Parents and children should be wary of internet friends who are:

- Known only by a nickname
- Whom they have never met in person
- Whose geography could prohibit a personal meeting with parents
- Whose identity cannot be confirmed.

Agents who pose as children in order to find predators connect in *five minutes* with an adult internet user who is aggressively

contacting potential child victims. On average, the FBI arrests two internet predators a month in Connecticut. Their conviction rate is 100% with sentences of ten years or longer. According to Agent Lawler, while both boys and girls are victims of internet threats, 80-90% of known victims are girls. He also noted that in every arrest case in Connecticut, the child’s computer was isolated in his or her bedroom. Therefore, Agent Lawler strongly recommends that computers with internet access be located in a common area of the home, where supervision is easier.

Another area of risk discussed was CyberBullying. Children are increasingly at risk for this new type of bullying which uses the internet. CyberBullying generally follows a cycle which includes a mean message posted on the internet which others join, followed by increasingly hostile and threatening messages. The student and/or parents complain to the school, which then can make a complaint to the internet provider. A complaint can also be made to law enforcement agencies. In most cases, victims know their bully and the action has occurred because of a failed friendship, jealousy or a feeling of being abused or embarrassed on the part of the bully. Having been teenagers, we all recognize these behaviors and feelings. Unfortunately, misuse of the internet has created a new and more widespread type of bullying.

At the end of his talk, Agent Lawler outlined responsibilities for parents and kids. By following these easy tips, we can help our children to be technologically savvy - and safe!

KIDS' RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE INTERNET

- Know what threats are out there.
- Don't lie about your age
- Don't talk to strangers
- Don't try to meet people on line
- Don't get into fights on the internet
- Don't send pictures of yourself
- Don't give people your personal information
- Do tell your parents or another trusted adult if something makes you uncomfortable



PARENTS/ADULTS' RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE INTERNET

- Warn your children of internet threats
- Set rules for computer and internet use
- Remind your children of appropriate behavior
- Locate the computer in family areas of the house
- Monitor computer activities
- Learn about threats
- Learn about the services and sites that your children use
- Don't depend upon computer control software to do your job for you
- Don't use the computer as a babysitter
- If there is a threat, don't overact, but don't wait to get the police or FBI involved
- Engage in *active listening* with your child