

Digital behavior can have tragic result

Cyberbullying, sexting can have long-term implications kids have not fully considered

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The chance of becoming addicted to a smartphone or tablet and the ways in which social media can damage self-esteem are real concerns.

But the stakes get even higher when kids encounter cyberbullies and other predators online.

Hinsdale police Officer Mike Coughlin cites an 11-year-old Michigan boy who took his own life after believing a Facebook prank that his 13-year-old girlfriend had committed suicide. Students at Monroe School were aware of the event, and it gave Coughlin the chance to reinforce an important message.

"We talked more about it, how dangerous it is when you post things and can hurt other people's feelings," he said.

Cyberbullying can take a variety of forms, he said — from spreading gossip to posting photos designed to embarrass a classmate to making threats.

One fifth-grader recently received a chain text instructing her to forward it to 25 friends or she would be found dead in her house. The girl, who had just gotten her phone, didn't have 25 contacts yet. The incident disrupted her behavior in class, and eventually she told her teacher what had happened.

"One of the things I tell the kids is to be part of the solution," Coughlin said. "Don't be part of the problem. Don't forward it."

For behavior to rise to the level of cyberbullying, there has to be a pattern. Being cruel isn't the same thing as being a bully, Coughlin said.

"We do that role-play in the classroom between being mean and being a jerk and being a real bully," he said.

Although cyberbullying is similar to face-to-face bullying, someone with a cloaked identity may be more prone to escalate their actions.

"People feel empowered and anonymous when they are in their rooms under the covers," Coughlin said. "Kids don't think that someone is going to know it's actually them. Since they feel they are more anonymous, than can be more aggressive and say meaner things."



Hinsdale police Officer Mike Coughlin said students should do three things if they receive a text from a bully. "Don't respond back to that cyberbully. Don't delete it. Then show a parent." Students who are aware of a friend who

And where a traditional bully doesn't have access to victims when they are home, a cyberbully can operate 24/7.

Experts say violent video games might be exacerbating the problem.

"There's just an abundance of research that shows that first-person shooter video games decrease (a player's) empathy," said Dr. Cara Hurley of Hinsdale, a clinical psychologist in private practice. "There is an increase in aggressive behavior. There is a lack of sensitivity to violence."

Even checking social media or playing more innocuous games can have an affect.

"When you're staring at a screen all day, you're not developing that empathy and those social skills," she said.

Kids might be less likely to tell their parents about a cyberbully for fear that they will lose their phone as a result.

"They might take that device away from them or limit that device, and that's the child's lifeline," Coughlin said.

Ele Santini, a licensed clinical social worker at Clarendon Hills Middle School, said parents need to help children understand when they need to talk to an adult, such as when texts or posts seem dan-

gerous or inappropriate.

She also suggested parents make it clear they will not impose consequences.

"If this happens, you need to come talk to me and you won't be in trouble," she said.

Coughlin tells kids they should keep in mind what their parents would think of their behavior while they're texting or posting to social media.

"Before you send anything on your phone or your laptop or your computer, pretend mom or dad is looking over your shoulder," he tells kids. "If they would say, 'Don't send that,' don't send it."

That includes sending intimate photos or text messages. Statistics suggest about one of four youth have sexted, said Rose Tenuta, a health educator at Robert Crown Center for Health Education in Hinsdale, including 16 percent of those aged 11 to 14.

"Kids don't recognize that this is a crime. They are distributing child pornography," she said.

The senders might think their photo or message will be seen only by the friend to whom they are sending it, but that's not usually the case.

"A large percentage of kids who receive an inappropriate message pass it on," Tenuta said, adding that 55 percent

is being bullied should tell a trusted adult. "If one of your friends confides in you and they say, 'Don't tell anyone,' if it's a matter of safety, you have to let someone know. We have to help them," he said. (Jim Slonoff photo)

pass it on to more than one person.

There is no such thing as temporary when it comes to digital photos. Coughlin emphasizes this with students.

"I explain to them, you take this silly picture and you're in your pajamas and you've got bed head and you think it's funny," he said.

The next day you change your mind and take it down, but someone already has it.

"Two years, five years down the road, it could be brought back up," he said. "It's out there forever."

Even pictures that seem harmless can pose a threat, Coughlin said. Social media accounts on sites like Instagram and Snapchat need to be private, he stressed. That also holds true for adults' social media outlets.

Coughlin warned parents that their kids don't always discriminate when they receive a friend or follower request because they want to look more popular.

"There are apps out there where you can buy friends, so if you only have 100 friends on Snapchat or Instagram, it can make it look like you have 800 or 1,000," he added. "It's online. You don't know who these people are."

Anyone could grab a photo

■ DIGITAL LIVING

This is the third in a four-part series on the digital age and how it affects young people's mental health.

of a middle-schooler, go on Instagram and pretend to be a fellow student, Coughlin said.

The same is true with live gaming on PS4 and Xbox, he said.

"You don't know who you're with," he said.

Even though the experts advocate parental awareness of what kids are doing with their devices, they acknowledge parents can't keep up with every app.

"You realize how little control you have over most of the content they're seeing," said Kris Adzia, director of education at Robert Crown. Her oldest child is 14. "As parents it's kind of acknowledging that fact and then helping them navigate that."

Risk-taking is an important part of adolescence, Adzia said, and parents need to help their kids discern appropriate boundaries.

"We want to keep them safe and keep them healthy," she said. "It's the conversation and letting them go and letting them make mistakes is what is more important for them."