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Anti-Bullying efforts in Coventry

Coventry PD helps parents see behind screen

Detective and resource officer try to educate, enable adults to combat schools' growing trend

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COVENTRY — If there's no getting away from ways to hurt someone using technology, then parents and educators need to make it a priority to continually educate themselves on the realities of cyber bullying and become just as cyber savvy as kids are.

This was the message Detective Kevin Harris and Officer Jason Burlingame of the Coventry Police Department wanted to convey at the

anti-bullying program "What's Behind the Screen," Wednesday night at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School.

The program was no-nonsense information that every parent, teacher and administrator can use to help prevent every form of cyber bullying, mainly through the use of social media.

The program was part of a five-

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Coventry Detective Kevin Harris says parents must be computer-savvy to deal with the issue of bullying in today's electronic world. Page A-2.

week anti-bullying program done at the middle school. Middle School behavioral specialist Kim Sturdahl said parents need to understand what exactly cyber bullying is, and recognize the point at which it crosses the line from a school issue to a police issue, and how easy it is for someone to get information about a child — or anyone

— online. Sturdahl explained that as part of the five-week program, students are being educated on the policy as well using grade-appropriate material.

FMS Principal Jennifer Roy said the program was put together by members of the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA).

"The information is so important," she said. "I see more and more parents who don't know the extent of social media."

Harris began his presentation by

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Parents taught about bullying

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explaining a few simple ideas such as what an IP address is and what smart phones can do before moving on to tell the audience that it's known that bullying can happen through email and texts, but that it also happens through Facebook and other social media. Online gaming and the Internet were identified as potential locations for bullies or worse.

"If you think 'not my kid,' think again," warned the detective. "I promise you they've looked at things you swear they haven't."

Harris went on to explain how GPS tracking, a feature of many smart phones, works. However, he informed parents that they can use the same technology potential bullies or predators are using to turn the tables a bit and find out where — or who — calls and texts come from.

Harris explained to the audience that one incident of a child or teen walking up to someone and saying they hate that person does not constitute a bully problem but if that same person is harassed on many different instances, then that can be grounds for a bullying problem. There are effective actions parents can take before the police get involved.

The issue of cyber-bullying has been taken to such extreme levels that the state adopted a Rhode Island Safe Schools Act June 30 of this year, which will direct the Department of Education to provide an age-appropriate model policy on bullying prevention to ensure a unified, statewide policy that follows Rhode Island General laws.

That policy, under the legislation, will include clear procedures for students, staff, parents, guardians and others to report bullying, procedures for responding to and investigating reports of bullying and a range of disciplinary actions that may be taken against a perpetrator for bullying.

Any school district policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation or bullying will also be amended to include Internet and cyberspace guidelines.

Those guidelines state that no student, employee, faculty or staff of a public school shall post, forward or otherwise disseminate any data, documents, photos, images or videos or other information using any technology medium, including social networking websites, which might result in a disruption of classroom activity of the educational process.

Harris said part of the issue is that some words in the law are very vague and open to wide interpretation such as the word "harassment" and "substantial."

"What one parent may see as substantial, another may not, etc.," he said.

Roy said one of the many steps administrators take in the schools is teaching responsibility.

"We use the motto, 'If you see something, say something,'" she said. "We want our students to build strength and confidence."

The principal explained that some of the reasons why victims don't come forward

Best protection is savvy parents

Coventry Police Department Detective Kevin Harris and Officer Jason Burlingame wanted to convey something important to parents at the anti-bullying program "What's Behind the Screen," Wednesday night at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School.

The program was no-nonsense information that adults could use to prevent or recognize bullying, mainly through the use of social media.

But it was clear that when it comes to using social media sites like Facebook and being computer-savvy in general, parents have some catching up to do to pull even with their kids.

Harris began his presentation by explaining a few simple concepts, such as what an IP address is and what smart phones can do.

"An IP address is just a serial number that is a cyber address for your home," he explained. "From there, the connection splits off to however many devices you have in your home that can connect wirelessly. Smart phones are mini computers, make no mistake about that. They have every capability a computer has."

It's known that bullying can happen through email and texts but it also happens through Facebook and other social media.

"More people use Facebook than Google," said Harris, who also works closely with the Rhode Island State Police. "And another way for someone to bully another is through online gaming."

He strongly recommended parents whose kids play games online, either on a computer or a gaming console, buy themselves a headset and listen in to what their child is hearing and from whom.

"Anyone could be on the other end of that; they could be in a chat room with 30 other people," he said.

"If you think 'not my kid,' think again," warned the detective. "I promise you they've looked at things you swear they haven't."

Harris also explained how a GPS system, when turned on, tracks where a person is by latitude and longitude.

"There are those out there who would have no problem pinpointing your child's exact location using the GPS and other free software," he said.

However, parents can use the same technology potential bullies or predators are using to turn the tables a bit.

He encouraged parents to contact phone carriers and ask what types of settings are available to track texts as well as incoming and outgoing calls.

"Parents really need to educate themselves; I can't stress that enough — and being online and using the Internet is a great, great tool but you've got to be savvy," he said. "You don't want to lock them down so much that the only site they can use is Disney. You'll do them a great disservice if there are too many restrictions."

Harris also strongly suggested that parents ask their children to help them start a Twitter or Facebook account as not only a way to maybe bond with their child, but also as a way to monitor what they're looking at.

"You can't always be looking over their shoulders but you can monitor their actions from far away," he said.

Feinstein behavioral specialist Kim Sturdahl said not every parent is as computer savvy as their kids.

"When I saw the presentation it shocked me," she said. "It's very scary what kids know and what they're getting into."

— Kendra Leigh Miller

is because they're fearful of retaliation or they think adults won't believe them.

"Sometimes it does take time to break down what a student is telling us and we do need to decipher what's true and false," she admitted. "If something is proven false it does take away from the time we can be spending helping someone that truly needs it."

Burlingame, who is the resource officer at Coventry High School, said in the past the department maybe received one or two

complaints a month, now it's one or two a day.

"The key is to have printouts of any thing you can," he advised. "E-mails records of texts — anything that can show proof of an incident," he said. "We can all work together and if there's a real problem, we will look into it further. We don't mind looking into any complaint and we'd rather look into it and have it be nothing than not having a parent come to us until it's too late."