

By Bill Husfelt

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I often share messages about the various challenges facing our children and educators and people frequently ask me how they can help. This week, I am writing about digital safety and there are some VERY specific things our entire community can do to help our students navigate this sometimes dangerous world.

According to a recent article I read, more than 58 percent of parents recently surveyed said they were concerned about their child's internet activity (<https://www.safewise.com/kids-online-safety-statistics/>). That's a great statistic in terms of illustrating the concerns of parents but it's troubling in terms of the other 42 percent ... are they parents who have a strict handle on their child's internet activity (difficult to do) or are they parents who trust their children are making good decisions?

That's important because here's what I know from our work with some third graders on this topic:

1. Almost all of them have access to the internet via some sort of device.
2. About 60 percent of the third graders in this group recently indicated that their parents/guardians **DO NOT** know what they do when they are online.
3. Almost all of them play online games that include chat features.
4. About 70 percent of them said they have felt uncomfortable by something someone said to them in an online chat.

That's terrifying!

The presentations to students about internet safety are part of the state-mandated Lauren's Kids Safer Smarter Kids program which includes human trafficking awareness instruction and online safety. The instruction is going on throughout the district in various grade levels but these statistics come from a group of third graders.

That means some eight- and nine-year-old students (our third graders) are chatting online with strangers that they assume are other children and in more than half of those situations, parents are completely unaware of these interactions.

To help combat that, Bay District Schools deploys a program called GoGuardian on all of the devices **we issue** and that program monitors the online activity of students while they are using **our devices**. Many students, however, connect online at home using their own devices and GoGuardian isn't monitoring those. GoGuardian sends us alerts if students use using troubling search terms like "bomb", "suicide" or "weapons at school" and it helps us identify those students for immediate support and intervention. In one situation, a student-initiated search about suicide triggered a GoGuardian warning that led us to the home of a student who was not attending school with the intent to do self-injury on that day. Our team was able to contact parents and intervene before anything terrible happened. That's the power of monitoring.

However, we know that we can't catch all of the troublesome behavior and we need to make sure that all parents and guardians are doing what they can to monitor and guide the online behavior of their students. There are some great tips here: https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-parental-control-software?test_uuid=06r4MYCu5PZzCkufjQSV3po&test_variant=b.

YOU CAN HELP us help our students whether you're a parent/guardian, a grandparent, a neighbor, youth group leader or even older sibling of a child with a device. Talk to the children about online safety, about mistakes you've made and hard lessons you've already learned about the digital world. Make sure the children in your lives understand that things are not always as they seem online and that it's very easy for people to seem trustworthy but to really be quite dangerous.

Panama City Beach Police Chief J.R. Talamantez puts on an amazing workshop called "Parents Against Predators" and during that workshop, he connects live to an internet chatroom to show parents how easy it is for students to be targeted by predators online. The entire audience always goes silent in shock as Chief Talamantez (sharing a fake profile of a young teen girl online) immediately connects with adults who make salacious comments and lewd invitations to someone they know is a child.

It's shocking but it's also real and it's happening everywhere.

So, this week I implore you to go and look at ALL of the devices used by children in your family. Search the history, and look for the apps that appear familiar but are actually fronts for other apps in disguise. This article has step-by-step instructions for finding, and deleting, hidden apps: <https://fenced.ai/blogs/how-to-find-hidden-apps-on-your-kids-device/>

I grew up in a world where it was tough to keep things hidden from adults. I went to school and interacted with my friends before- and after-school with adult supervision. When I was at home, someone was there to monitor my phone conversations because we only had one phone! Chances are, your childhood was somewhat similar but, sadly, today's world is so very, very different. Families can be together after dinner on the couch but can all be engaged in completely different, and separate, activities. While adults are wise to the ways of the world and can make good decisions concerning content and how they interact with people online, our children are much more naïve and trusting. **They need us to teach them, they need us to role model for them and, ultimately, they need us to keep them safe in the real world and in the virtual world.**

Stay safe and God Bless!