

Parents warned of Internet's 'Dark Side'

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"MySpace is a menu for sexual predators. They can search by age, gender, ethnicity, height, body type, zip-code and so on. I don't know about you but I don't want my kids on the menu!"

-- Kevin Outland

Internet safety and tools to protect children from online predators and adult Web sites were the focus of Kevin Outland's "The Dark Side of the Web" presentation Oct. 16 at Rochester Community Schools' Administration Building.

During the first half of the presentation, Outland showed, often graphic information that children can obtain by innocently playing games, doing research for school or chatting with friends on the computer. In the second half, he offered safety tips aimed at providing layers of protection for children using the Internet.

"Usually when I look out in the audience during my presentation the parents look like deer in headlights because they had no idea about the dangers lurking out there," Outland said.

Outland worked as a consultant in the Internet business for 12 years prior to launching his seminars that raise awareness of the Web's pitfalls.

Monday's presentation was the second in a two-part series of enrichment programs organized by the Rochester PTA Council called "Rochester Unplugged." The first program, "Rochester Exposed," was held Oct. 2 and focused on the effects of violent media on children.

Outland discussed aspects of the Internet that can include links to pornography, such as e-mail spam tricks, instant messaging and peer-to-peer file sharing software like KaZaA, Morpheus or Limewire. This software allows underage users to download music and movies, including hardcore pornographic films.

Outland shared some troubling statistics regarding kids and porn, including:

- The average age of a child's first experience with pornography is 11.
- 90 percent of children ages 8-16 have viewed pornography online.
- 62 percent of parents are unaware that children have accessed pornography.
- Pornography is more physically addicting than cocaine.

MYSPACE

Many parents of teens expressed concerns about MySpace, an online site where people post information about themselves.

"My daughter uses her computer often. I don't like the fact that people can see her photo and her e-mails that basically say where she is going," said the mother of a 15-year-old Stoney Creek High School student who asked to be anonymous so as not to embarrass her daughter. "That is my concern and I'm going to take action."

According to Outland's research, he found that New York Detective Frank Giardina's team discovered that 744 sex offenders were found to have MySpace profiles. "These are sex offenders that were dumb enough to use their real names," Outland said. "The number of sex offenders that have MySpace profiles that chose to be anonymous is unknown."

The audience was surprised when Outland showed several local news stories that pinpointed assaults and Internet extortions -- many of them stemming from MySpace.

"Even though your child may insist that MySpace is private, it isn't," he said. "In my research, I discovered from a local sheriff that there is a software program available to anyone that opens all MySpace accounts. Private or not."

Doreen Richardson, who has three boys in the Rochester school district, said: "I am overwhelmed. Currently, two of my boys have computers in their bedrooms. They do homework with the door open, but I had no idea of the dangers that are out there. I'm planning to implement all of the advice I heard, tonight."

She also said she believes many kids are "addicted to the computer," and agreed with other parents who stated that "teens will be very upset about new boundaries."

"The kids constantly check their e-mail," Richardson said. "It's such a social thing that they could be ostracized for not participating. It will be painful, but it's necessary."

In addition, she said, "There are lots of good kids out there. It's not that we don't trust our kids. It's that we don't trust others."

THE INTERNET

Outland said he wants people to understand there is no separation between "good and bad" Web sites.

"Web sites on the Internet are co-mingled. There is nothing built into the Internet that separates the two. This makes it really easy for kids to end up on inappropriate Web sites by accident."

Outland cautioned that temptation flourishes online.

"The pornography industry is a \$12 billion industry in the U.S. Unfortunately it does not care about the age of its next customer," he said. "Often, software or movies that contain hardcore pornography or violent images are free and available for your child to watch. Similarly, gambling Web sites often offer free software so you can play for free knowing that when you're hooked you'll want to go online and bet for real."

"Just like drug dealers often give people free drugs ... at first ... to lure them in and get them hooked, the porn and gambling industries are using the Internet in much the same way."

In addition to pornography, Outland showed several Web sites where children can be exposed to actual images of people being killed. "Hate sites and Web sites including extreme violence are equally as harmful to your children," he said.

SOLUTIONS

"The better we understand the dangers, the more seriously we'll take the problem," Outland told parents.

He said there are tools for checking if computers have a history connecting with pornographic or hate sites. "If you do find that your child has accessed these types of Web sites, it's time to sit down as a family and address the issue," Outland said. "Many times kids are just embarrassed or afraid to tell their parents when they have seen something inappropriate online, even when they have come across it by accident."

Outland passed out a list of 15 ways parents can protect their families. These include:

- Give kids some cold, hard facts about the dangers of the Internet
- Set-up guidelines for Internet use in the home
- Get Internet filtering software so children can't end up on inappropriate Web sites

- Keep the computer in a high-traffic area of your home (not in a child's bedroom)
- Tell children they should never meet anyone off-line that they met online
- Never post personal information in a chat room
- Randomly check your child's sent and received e-mails
- Randomly check your computer for inappropriate files and usage by using a tool like Content Audit, which is free and can be found at contentwatch.com/audit
- If you think your child may have a problem or addiction, get help right away

If all else fails, Outland says, "Get rid of your child's Internet connection."

For additional information on Internet safety and to find out how to bring "The Dark Side of the Web" Seminar to your school, church or other organization go to www.StopTheDarkSide.com.