

NewburyportNews.com, Newburyport, MA

March 31, 2011

Cyberbullying expert speaks to parents

Cyberbullying pro says parents don't need to be experts to protect kids

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NEWBURYPORT — Accepting your children will undoubtedly make "bone-headed" mistakes online is the first step in helping them navigate the dangerous realms of cyberspace.

That's according to Dr. Elizabeth Englander, a national cyberbullying expert who spoke to a crowd of 200 at yesterday's second annual YWCA Engaging Communities Luncheon.

Englander's presentation sought to help parents and community leaders see social media and not-so-private cyber communication in a way that could make a difference for the next generation.

Covering questions many parents have, such as when to cave and purchase a cellphone for their youngster or allow them to get a text message plan or Facebook account, Englander spoke from a position of authority on issues that are front and center in every family today.

The founder and director of Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Clinic, Englander also shared some startling statistics gleaned from a cyberbullying study performed by her center.

"My job is to look at the dark side," Englander said as a preface to her program.

While parents might feel overwhelmed at the idea of protecting their children online and helping them avoid mistakes inherent in a platform that promotes rash, immediate written communication, Englander said adults don't have to be computer experts to guide their kids through the online age.

Parents' first goal should be to dispel any notion that their child isn't going to make some mistakes along the way. She told parents that if a call comes from the principal's office notifying them that their child has made the mistake of, for example, posting something online they shouldn't have or sending an inappropriate text, they should actually be glad.

"Pat yourself on the back that your child has been lucky enough to make their bone-headed mistake while they're young," she said.

Through her study on cyberbullying, Englander said she determined kids are lacking in technology skills, contributing to their propensity for making mistakes online. They also demonstrated a lack of ability to grasp the idea that nothing they put online is private.

With the ability for people today to send thoughts and ideas in rapid-fire succession, before the mind has had a

chance to think it through, Englander said kids don't realize how emails and text messages change the realm of communication people normally have with one another.

Englander said young people don't understand why they should care that their thoughts and life stories remain private and not disseminated to the masses. For that reason, Englander feels kids need to be monitored online no matter what.

For kids who make a strong case for their rights to privacy, Englander suggests there lies parents' opportunity to bring home their point. "Don't you get it? There is no privacy on that kind of site," she suggests telling them.

A fan of programs that monitor children's online activity, Englander said young people simply don't know the perils of providing too much information on the Internet. While they might not be able to conceive that a college admissions staffer or future employer might turn them down because they found something objectionable on their Facebook page, they will get in the habit of being mindful if they know Mom and Dad can see what's online.

"That's how you get them in the habit," Englander said.

Englander, who referred to a common cellphone as a mobile computer device, said her study revealed students text 90 percent of the time and rarely talk on the phone. She recommended parents hold off on allowing texting until their children are in high school if they want their kids to enjoy an easier transition through the middle school years. She said that rule goes especially for young girls, who are more likely to be bullied by a friend who has their cellphone information than boys.

For children who lament that their lives will be ruined if they don't have a cellphone and the ability to text message or can't keep up with their pals on Facebook, Englander asked audience members to recall a time they took a similar tactic with their own parents to get something they desperately wanted.

"This is an old argument that's trotted out generation after generation," she said.

In addition to Englander's presentation, yesterday's luncheon included a presentation by Rep. Michael Costello, D-Newburyport, the event's honorary chairman, who highlighted some of the new laws regarding cyberbullying.

Awards were also presented to three Community Champions who have gone beyond the call of duty working with local youth. The awards went to Donna Georges, director of Amesbury Academy Charter School, a 30-year teacher and certified social worker involved in numerous organizations that support local youth; Andrea Egmont, Newburyport's supervisor of youth and recreational services who has developed youth empowerment programs that have changed young lives; and Newburyport police Inspector Brian Brunault, a 30-year veteran of the department who has worked with local kids and adults on Internet safety.