



Teens teach Internet safety

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ORILLIA - The pitfalls and perils of life online are the focus of a youth-driven initiative that arms elementary-age students with tools to stay safe in cyber space.

Rolling out in schools in Orillia, Barrie and beyond, the "Youth Connected" project addresses online bullying, 'sexting' and Internet safety with a presentation developed by those who best understand the risks inherent to the Internet – teenagers.

"Without the students, we wouldn't have the resources and the dynamic program that we have," said Const. Monica Cachagee, the OPP's provincial online risk coordinator.

The program is delivered by teens and operates on the assumption that younger students are more likely to talk openly with their peers than they are with adults.

"This is not just another presentation," promises 16-year-old Liam MacDonald, a member of the project team that is raising awareness and educating elementary-age students. "This means just as much to us as it does to them."

The unique initiative evolved out of an earlier effort by OPP community volunteer Kevin Lehman to develop an Internet safety video for students.

"They hated it," Lehman recalled of the feedback that followed his presentation a year ago. "They said it was dated and it wasn't very topical."

Undeterred, he enlisted the help of experts.

"Teenagers all," he says. "We asked them to rework our effort."

Working with the separate school board, (nine) students were chosen from Patrick Fogarty Catholic Secondary School in Orillia and St. Joseph's Catholic High School in Barrie.

Drawing on their personal knowledge of the online world, the team developed a revamped video presentation that would better resonate with the next generation.

Together they have shown the video to more than 1,000 students at area schools during the initial pilot phase.

"We don't want to scare them, we want to show them you can use (the Internet) while being safe and having fun," said Kennedy Loupelle, 16.

Adds Taylor Redmond:

"We want to give them the opportunity to learn from mistakes that have happened, and grow from it."

Topics range from online etiquette and the importance of keeping personal information private to the legal and personal ramifications of 'sexting' – sending sexually suggestive messages or photos.

"They aren't aware of the consequences, that that picture could affect them in 15 years when they apply for a job," team member Nakita Hayes says.



Teens teach Internet safety. Students from Patrick Fogarty Catholic Secondary School in Orillia and St. Joseph's Catholic High School in Barrie are helping deliver an Internet safety program to area elementary-school children. Pictured are: (front row) Bailey Greene, Shannon Banfield, Nakita Hayes, Paul Stemmler; (back row) Emily Decock, Jerome Freeman, Kennedy Loupelle, Liam MacDonald, and Taylor Redmond.

Equally concerning is the online "bashing" that frequently crops up on social networking sites, adds Hayes, who found herself the victim of mean-spirited online attacks at the end of Grade 7.

"They were very hurtful messages," she says. "It was very difficult. I knew for a fact that they wouldn't have said those things to me in person."

The emerging program was made possible through a partnership involving the separate school board, the Frank Cowan Company and the OPP Youth Foundation.

The OPP is making the video available to detachments across Ontario in the hope that teens in those communities will help spread the message.

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