

Catholic educators focus on keeping students safe on the Internet

By Michael Brown
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PROVIDENCE, R.I. (CNS) -- A generation ago, parents worried about their children getting in with the wrong crowd. Today, they worry the wrong crowd is being invited into their children's homes through the Internet.

To combat the pervasive and sometimes dangerous impact of the Internet on today's youths, educators across the country are being trained in schools and diocesan programs about how to keep students safe while they are online.

Linda Pacheco, assistant director of public programs for the Bristol County Sheriff's Office in Massachusetts recently gave a presentation to leaders in the Providence Diocese on the dangers of the Internet, especially threats linked to putting personal information on Web sites like www.myspace.com where users post online journals, photos, and thoughts and interests to share with others.

Pacheco said students rarely realize that the information they post and messages they send on the Internet can be viewed by millions of people. That false sense of security allows some to believe that they can do and say anything they want without restrictions.

She also told them about a federally-funded Internet safety education program called i-SAFE America sponsored by a nonprofit group that educates parents and youths about Internet responsibility. All materials in the program are free, but users must be certified by the company, which provides free training.

Programs such as i-SAFE -- www.isafe.org -- are essential, she noted, just as drivers' education training is needed before teenagers can obtain a license.

She said cyberbullying is the latest emerging trend among Web users, citing a recent i-SAFE study that showed that 42 percent of young Internet users have been bullied online. Nearly 60 percent admit to saying hurtful things online and the same percentage said that they have been hurt by something said about them on the Internet. Fifty-eight percent of those verbally abused online did not tell adults or parents, Pacheco said.

The prevalence of sexual predators online has led law enforcement officials to start building their own networks aimed at catching them. But predators have also formed groups, she said, enabling them to work together to coordinate a meeting between a predator and a victim.

Tim Tohill, executive director of the Rape & Sexual Abuse Center in Nashville, told representatives from the Nashville Diocese that just as abusers attempt to build up the trust of children in person before violating them, so do online predators. Children need to be taught not to share personal information with strangers over the Internet, and certainly not to meet them in person.

He said parents must be aware if their teenagers are using Web sites such as www.myspace.com where they can post personal profiles and chat with friends, but that make them fair game for anyone, including some who may not have honorable intentions.

Myspace.com, which has more than 60 million members, announced April 11 that it has hired someone to oversee safety, education, privacy and law enforcement affairs. In March, the FBI arrested two men in connection with separate sexual molestation charges involving two girls, ages 11 and 14, whom they allegedly met through the site.

The site forbids minors 13 and younger from joining and provides special protection for 14- and 15-year-olds, but children can lie about their ages to get around the restrictions.

Tohill strongly discouraged the idea of children having computers in their bedrooms, away from parental oversight. Tohill said when his sons were in high school, the family computer was in the kitchen. "It was there for a reason," he said, "and not because it was the most convenient place for it."

Mary Kay Cullinan, diocesan director of the Office of Religious Education in Metuchen, N.J., said Internet safety is currently part of the religious education curriculum because it is a moral issue.

Catholic Schools and religious education programs in the Metuchen Diocese are implementing NetSmartz, an Internet safety program, in all schools and parishes. The program --- www.netsmartz.org -- was created by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

As Cullinan put it, the program "talks to kids in their language about how to avoid all the bad things out there." It combines an interactive CD with Web-based material to educate parents and children about dangers on the Internet.

During an April 5 Internet safety seminar for school principals, technology teachers and parish catechetical leaders at Metuchen's diocesan pastoral center, a Catholic high school teacher said the safety of students extends outside school walls.

Educators were advised to tell their students never to meet anyone in person that they first met online, and to be sure their students understand that people do not always tell the truth, that gossip can be hurtful and harmful, and that personal information is more than just a name and address. Students should also know to tell a parent or guardian if something on the Internet makes them feel scared, uncomfortable or confused.