

Pitfalls of online profile content discussed at EV

Survey by students shows prevalence of potentially dangerous Internet practices

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Mentor students from left, are Kendra Morscheck, East Valley Junior High; Audrey Cook, EVHS; Doug Glendenning, EVHS; and Hannah Bowerman, EVJH.

If a teen has a MySpace page, odds are they can be found in person by anyone with a working knowledge of Google even if they try to mask their identity.

During a recent presentation on Internet safety to East Valley parents, Brent Howard of Educational Service District 101 demonstrated how easy it is to find the identity of someone on the Internet. Using only a first name, race and town of residence from a local student's MySpace page, within five minutes he was able to find the student's full name, a picture, which school he went to, his father's name and picture and a home address. Then he used Google Maps to pinpoint the student's home and school and what route he would likely take when walking home.

"You can see how quickly you can be found online," he said. "We all have a digital footprint."

Several East Valley middle school and high school mentor students recently collaborated to do an anonymous survey of the Internet behavior of 795 fellow students. The information they found is enough to give any parent pause. Forty-two percent admitted sharing personal information online. One in five said they talked to strangers online. And one out of three said they would not tell a parent if something mean or hurtful happened to them online. Many said they were afraid if they reported it their online privileges would be taken away.

"The Web is not a bad thing," Howard said. "We need to help kids navigate this safely."

Some warning signs for parents to look for are teens who spend hours and hours online, get phone calls from people you don't know or start getting gifts in the mail.

Teens can take action to protect themselves by not posting personal information online, not adding strangers to their friend lists and not lying about their age. Setting a profile to private isn't foolproof, either.

"Hackers know how to get around it and they do it all the time," said high school junior Doug Glendenning. "Even if they mark it private, you can see some stuff. It's not totally private."

Once material is posted online, it never goes away. That's something teens need to keep in mind when posting pictures to the Web. "Once you get it out there, you can't get it back," said Howard.

After scaring the wits out of parents, East Valley Middle School eighth-grader Kendra Morscheck had a word of a caution. "Don't go home and take away everything they have," she said. "Then they'll start hiding it."

Morscheck, who has a MySpace page, said doing the survey and preparing for the presentation was eye-opening for her. She modified her online profile, taking out details that would help identify her. "I did go back and change a lot of things," she said.

The students also talked about texting, mostly having to do with a new fad known as “sexting.” Sexting is when a teenager, usually a girl, sends nude or semi-nude pictures of herself. The photo usually ends up getting passed around. Students can be charged with distributing or possessing child pornography, even the student who took the picture of herself.

Glendenning said he was surprised to find that criminal charges can happen in those cases. He said he has heard of sexting happening in his school. “Oh, yeah, I’ve heard of that,” he said. “I don’t think kids realize the problem.”

Regular texting is also the main way many students keep in touch with each other. “All the rumors that get spread are through texting,” he said.

In a technological world, it’s important that kids learn the right way to be wired in by being safe and using technology to their advantage. “We need this technology,” said Howard. “Our kids need it.”

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