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Schools get help patrolling Net

By LAURA TODE of The Gazette Staff

When school resource officer Misti Robertson has some downtime in her day at Lewis and Clark Middle School, she surfs the MySpace pages on the Internet to see what her students and other teens in Billings are up to.

What she finds would shock most parents.

Through their profiles on the popular social networking site, she sees references to drug use, gang activity and threats of violence - all from local students.

She also frequently encounters cyber-bullying, where students use the Internet - often posing as the person they hope to target - to humiliate and harass fellow students.

"They are mean - God, they are mean to each other," she said.

Students who take their school relationships to the Internet unknowingly make cyberspace an extension of the school, and that makes Internet safety a part of a school resource officer's beat.

Robertson was one of 11 school resource officers from Billings, the surrounding area and Wyoming who attended an Internet-safety training session Thursday that was offered through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The center gave school resource officers a curriculum called NetSmartz and instruction on how to bring the program to their schools. The goal is to teach children safe surfing and alert them to the dangers they could encounter online. NetSmartz is an interactive course that offers materials that are appropriate for students from kindergarten through high school, and it includes material for parents and teachers as well.

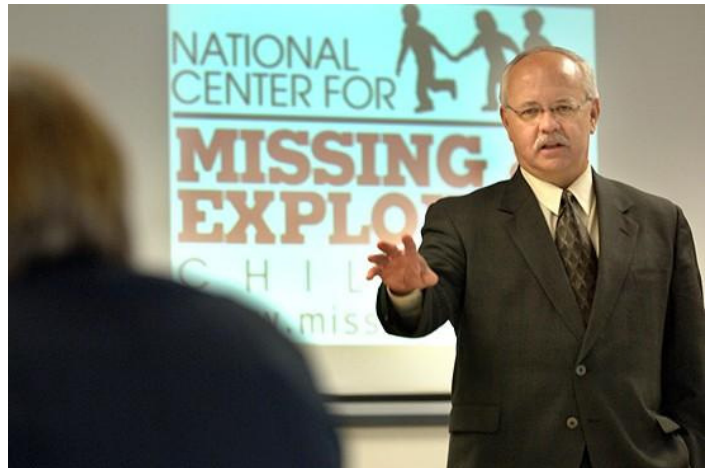
Robertson said she is eager to take what she has learned back to Lewis and Clark Middle School.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Marcia Hurd told officers that she and her colleagues are prosecuting more cases of child pornography and child exploitation by online predators than ever before. The number of cases reported increases every year, she said.

"Some of it is because of the safety programs," Hurd said. "Kids are becoming more aware and are telling someone about it."

But youngsters don't often go to their parents, she added.

"To me, the SRO role, especially for junior high and high schools, is extremely important because they can be that trusted adult," Hurd said.



Kevin Campana speaks during a class for school resource officers on cyber crime Thursday morning at Montana State University-Billings.

Kevin Campana, the executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers, said school resource officers are trained to be the on-site security experts at schools and have an important role as safety trainers for parents, staff and students. But they also must develop a rapport with students and act as counselors, he said.

"All of them are sworn police officers and sheriff's deputies," Campana said. "They have power of arrest and carry firearms. They have all the power other officers have, but we teach them to have a little kinder and gentler approach."

Campana, a native of Anaconda, presented information at the training as well and encouraged the school resource officers to make presentations to students and parents.

Parents and educators attended a similar NetSmartz course Thursday.

Billings was one of four Montana cities that hosted the training.

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