

## Expert: Cyberbullying, predators threaten teens

By [GAIL SCHONTZLER](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

Communicating with kids, not threatening or spying, is the best way for parents and teachers to keep kids safe from technological threats like cyber-bullying and Internet predators.

That was the message Russell Grimes shared with 24 teachers and school-based police officers at a workshop on cyber safety, held Tuesday as part of the Montana Behavioral Initiative conference at Montana State University.

Grimes is a law enforcement information technology specialist at the Montana Safe Schools Center, part of the University of Montana's Division of Educational Research and Service.

It's scary, Grimes said, but most children would rather try to deal with an online predator on their own than tell a trusted adult, because kids are afraid their parents will take away their computer, cell phone, games or other technology.

"It's their life," he said.

You can't count on software or firewalls to keep kids safe, because almost anything can be circumvented, Grimes said. "The best way is to talk with them."

When school districts have had bad experiences, the response often is to take computers entirely out of the schools. That's not the answer, Grimes said. Kids today have countless ways to access the Internet - from friends' computers to wireless connections to cell phones to even video game gear.

Charles Harvey, a Billings eighth-grade teacher, agreed, saying that taking away computers is like "taking away pencils if kids are writing dirty notes." It's the misuse, not the tool, that's the problem.

But the Internet makes misuse a lot worse.

A Montana high school student in Stevensville suffered the consequences of cyber-bullying in May, said Jen von Sehlen, outreach specialist with the Safe Schools center.

The boy had been bullied most of his life, she said, when other students started a false rumor that he had a hit list and was planning to bring a weapon to school. The news spread like wildfire by cell-phone texting and the Internet. The school was nearly empty one Friday, as parents and students feared another Virginia Tech massacre. The 15-year-old victim was forced to wear an electronic bracelet until it was determined the whole thing was a lie. The family planned to move away.

Another growing concern is that kids post all kinds of personal information and photos online at networking sites like MySpace, Grimes said. Once something is posted, he said, "you can never get it back."

Teens have posted photos of themselves drinking, doing keg stands, girls partying topless, or guys flashing gang signs. Kids think it's fun to post suggestive photos of naked girlfriends or boyfriends. But if they're underage, it's a felony, Grimes said.

Sexual predators are adept at hunting online for personal information about kids and at gaining the

trust of lonely teens and becoming their best online friend.

One of the best things parents can do, Grimes said, is set up the computer in a family room or kitchen, not their child's bedroom. Talk together to come up with rules for using the computer safely. And never let a child meet in person with someone they've only met online without the parent's permission.