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Educators, law enforcement learn how to help protect kids on Internet *By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian*

Beware: The face of the schoolyard bully is changing.

As technology like the World Wide Web becomes integral to the curriculum in elementary and middle schools, Web-savvy students have started surfing the Internet at earlier ages. That means a new breed of predator is carrying a hall pass, and students are in danger of losing more than merely their milk money, Internet safety experts said Monday.

But although young children are gaining access to the Net, they don't necessarily understand the depth of the technology.

"It's extremely difficult for young children to grasp the idea of a virtual world and what kind of dangers lurk there," said Rachel Johnston of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "It's not like strangers with candy. They don't realize how vulnerable they are online."

In a classroom, Johnston said she uses the example of a spider web to help explain the Internet. That's easier for a third-grader to understand than the textbook definition of the Internet: a decentralized worldwide network of computers that can communicate with each other.

"We want our children to get excited about Internet safety," Johnston said.

On Monday, Johnston addressed law enforcement officials and educators during an Internet safety training seminar at the Missoula Public Library, where the Montana Safe Schools Project, a branch of the University of Montana's Division of Educational Research and Service, kicked off a week of statewide training in collaboration with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's NetSmartz program.

Johnston guided police officers, sheriff's deputies, school resource officers and educators through a tutorial of the NetSmartz computer program - an animated workshop meant to teach children how to stay safe on the Internet. Later in the day, with a more lively reaction, Johnston showed the program to a group of third-graders from Russell Elementary School.

Assisting Johnston was Montana Democratic Sen. Max Baucus, who is chair of the Cyber Crime Advisory Panel and has long been active in Internet safety issues along with Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont.

"It's sort of a nonpartisan issue," said Matthew Taylor, associate director of UM's Division of Educational Research and Service. "Both delegations have worked together in a constructive manner on a lot of issues, and Internet safety is one of those topics."

Introducing a host of colorful, interactive, sing-singing characters with names like "Clicky," the NetSmartz program wowed the students, who went back to school chanting the lyrics to the "Use Your NetSmartz" rap.

The characters teach students to keep their personal information private, warn of the dangers posed by Internet predators and "cyber bullies," discuss computer viruses and even provide pop quizzes about the blogosphere.



Area law enforcement officers and educators spent Monday morning at the Missoula Public Library listening to Rachel Johnston, with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, talk about Internet safety. Johnston explained the National Center's NetSmartz program, which is designed to educate young people about the hazards of the Internet. Photo by MICHAEL GALLACHER/Missoulian

The program also gives scenarios that detail the disturbing problems other students have encountered on the Internet.

Monday's event was orchestrated by the Montana Safe Schools Project, a conduit to get similar Internet safety programs into schools.

The Montana Safe Schools Project has rolled out other Web safety programs in the past, some of which are still used in Missoula's high schools, Taylor said. The software is free to schools and law enforcement agencies, and can be obtained at www.NetSmartz.org.

Taylor said the message is becoming more urgent every year, pointing to a new national survey of online youth that shows increases in exposure to sexual material and harassment.

In a recent study conducted by researchers for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a survey compared experiences in 1999 and 2000 with those in 2005. The study found a pronounced increase in Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17 who were exposed to unwanted sexual material - fully one-third in 2005, compared to 25 percent previously.

The study attributed the increase to aggressive tactics by pornography marketers and the increased speed and capacity of computers and Internet connections to transmit images.

"We've got to start teaching safe Web-surfing practices when students are in elementary schools," Taylor said.

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