



Middle-schoolers get tips on Internet safety

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By *ERICKA SCHENCK SMITH of the Missoulian*

At least one of Susie Graham's sixth-grade computer science students said he would be changing his online screen name after an Internet safety class Wednesday.

It included his initials, which someone in a chat room could conceivably use in an effort to identify him outside the cyber world.

Students should also be careful not to give out their ages, addresses, phone numbers or other identifying information to people they don't know, said Lee Taylor, an instructor with the national i-SAFE organization. I-SAFE is a congressionally funded nonprofit, tasked with making Internet safety education widely available to American kids.

Taylor visited two of Graham's sixth-grade classes at C.S. Porter School in Missoula on Wednesday to talk about the various ways kids can protect themselves - then pass the word on to their parents and friends. Her trip was requested by principal Roberta Stengel.

As many as 87 percent of the people in the United States can be tracked down just by knowing their age, sex and location, Taylor cautioned the students.

The Internet can be fun - and a great way to look up information for school - but Taylor said kids need to be extra careful. Chat rooms especially can be a way for unsuspecting kids to encounter unsavory characters. And as many as one in five kids have been propositioned by someone online.

"We have to face the fact that not everybody's a good guy out there," she said.

It's never a good idea to take privacy for granted on the Internet, Taylor said, comparing chat rooms to playgrounds, where anyone can sidle up next to you and listen in.

But the problems associated with giving out personal information aren't limited to predators, Taylor said. Kids who give out their e-mail addresses open themselves up to waves of spam e-mail and e-mail viruses. Credit card numbers can be used in identity theft scams. The opportunities for deceit abound.

Her suggestions?

- Don't give out personal information.
- Pick an anonymous screen name.
- Don't give out your e-mail address.
- Watch what you say.
- Don't just give out information to anyone who asks.

- Talk to your parents if you're uncomfortable about anything that's happening online.

Ann Minckler of the University of Montana's Division of Educational Research and Service said she is hoping to bring similar training programs to other schools statewide within the next year.

DERS is also presenting a town hall meeting and parent training Saturday to teach parents how to keep their kids safe online. The event takes place at 10 a.m. at the Holiday Inn Parkside. Participants will include U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., and representatives from i-SAFE, UM, the FBI, city police and Internet Connect Services.

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