Cyber Parenting

It always makes me smile to see children playing outside as the warmer weather sets in. But even in the park or at the beach, children seem to have electronic devices attached to them. Some have a cell phone, others an I-pad, and some have hand held video games. The cyber world seems to follow our children around wherever they go. Let's face it, our kids are growing up online. The "cyberhood" has replaced the neighborhood. Since this month has been devoted to internet safety at Seaman, it seems the perfect opportunity to talk about cyber parenting as well as share some information that I have learned from your children over the past year regarding their cyber use. Based on conversations with our Seaman students, there seems to be two distinct online dangers that need to be the focus of education and monitoring - basic internet safety and cyber bullying.

Most children I have spoken to seem to have an understanding that the cyber world can be a dangerous place. Children have reported frustration with the foul language they hear through their internet online gaming systems, such as X-box. They've experienced pornography sites popping up with googled words related to Disney. Some students reported that they have experienced people hack into their accounts and change their passwords. One student explained to me that their friend retrieved and used their password because they logged onto their home computer while on a play date at their friend's house. Most of our older students seemed to be aware of identity theft and some have even experienced identity theft in their families.

Even though our students are aware of many of these dangers, many of our students do not fully understand how these dangers come about and how they may be able to prevent them. Many students admitted to sharing passwords with friends, completely naïve to the dangers of changing friendships. Several students didn't seem to be aware of the dangers of opening an e-mail attachment from an unknown sender.   Most children believed that if they deleted something it could never be retrieved. Many children seem to have a false sense of security just because they are online in the safety of their home. To complicate matters even more, some children have been misled into believing that internet strangers are familiar people. The online terms "friend" and "buddy" confused many of them into thinking that strangers were people they knew well (for example playing video games with strangers they accepted as "friends' or "buddies").   Several students also didn't realize that an online video game opponent that said they were the same age as them could actually have been an adult.

Now let's talk about those hand held gaming devices with blue tooth (e.g. DS devices) that your child may be using while you are shopping around the mall. Several children reported receiving instant messages through them from people they didn't know while out in public. Some of these instant messages stated that they were other children shopping with their parents and one such instant message even tried to arrange a meeting place to "hang out". It's important to be aware that many of these devices allow your child to receive instant messages from within a 300 foot range. So, any stranger within your child's vicinity can chat with them while you are busy shopping.

When it comes to cyber bullying, many children may be even less knowledgeable. Even children who have a good deal of knowledge about how to protect themselves from internet predators and strangers are not always clear on what is considered cyber bullying with peers. Children seem more aware of face-to-face bullying behaviors, but have a hard time transferring this to the cyber world. One 5th grade student recently explained to me, "I've had so many problems with friends since we all got phones…group texts are another way I get peer pressured and bullied." Over the past year, I have witnessed rumors that spread online instantly. Children have admitted to posing as someone else as a "joke". Students acknowledged that they had excluded friends from a "buddy" list when they got angry with them. Children have been posting their parties and "hang outs" on Instagram, while others see these posts and feel hurt and isolated. Children have posted or threatened to post pics of other students without their consent or knowledge. Some children's photos have been getting all the "likes" while others have gotten ignored. Many students reported that at some point they've made unkind comments through their computer that they wouldn't have said in person. And, with just a few clicks, these hurtful messages were sent to large groups of people.

So what can you do as a cyber parent? Like it or not, you have to join their cyber world. Consider sharing an e-mail account so you can monitor interactions. Educate yourself about your child's internet behaviors and engage them in dialogue about their activities and potential risks. Just like children have different extra-curricular interests, they also have different internet preferences. Some children enjoy surfing YouTube videos. Others prefer social chatting. Some use the internet solely for gaming purposes. Some do all three. Most students reported that their parents did not know the sites they visited online. If your child were to leave the house you would want to know where they were going and who they were going with. The internet should be viewed similarly as a "place". You need to know what websites and social sites they are going to, who is online with them and who they are talking to. If they are on Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook, you should have access to their passwords and accounts. Don't be afraid to sit down next to your child while they are on the computer or their phone and ask them to show you their favorite sites. If they have phones, you have a right to see their texts and periodically check them out. That is not an invasion of their privacy. It is for their safety.

There are other general guidelines that are equally important to keep in mind. Don't allow your child to surf around aimlessly. Don't allow your child to register for any contests or games without your permission. Most experts recommend making online access available only in a common room so behavior can be monitored. This means cell phones should not go with children into their bedrooms at night. At night, kids seem more likely to engage in impulsive, risky behaviors. For those who already have cell phones, look into safe cell phone features that give you greater control over what your child can access. Look into blocking, filtering, and tracking software that may be offered or purchased.

As for cyber bullying education, students need to be instructed not to say anything on line that they wouldn't say in person. Have discussions with your children about the

range of bullying behaviors in the cyber world such as rumor spreading, exclusion, sending a hurtful message, or even forwarding a hurtful message. If they are on the receiving end of a hurtful message, direct them to save and print the message and bring it to a trusted adult. You may have to be even more of a policeman if your child has difficulty with impulsivity, anger management or frustration tolerance, since the cyber world is particularly disastrous for children who don't stop and think before they comment or post. In order to prevent them from escalating a conflict when they are angry, direct children to walk away from their screens until they have calmed down. "Stop Then Send" has been a phrase that people have used to remind children to think about something they are sending before they actually send it.

     Allowing your child to access technology without educating them appropriately has been likened to giving them the keys to your car without teaching them how to drive. As cyber parents we need to teach children to be accountable for their actions on and off line. They need to know that being a good person in the cyber world is just as important as being a good person on the playground. If you haven't already, I urge you to start some of these conversations with your children. As with any type of learning, children need to hear these lessons multiple times to have the greatest impact. So even though our internet safety month is coming to a close, these conversations need to be ongoing. We must continue together on this journey as partners in protecting our children in the cyber world.

Elyssa Crimeni
School Psychologist