

Cyber-bullying

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Parents receive wake-up call about kids' use of social media

Lincoln attorney speaks out about potential dangers of Internet, cell phones

A sexting incident involving a 16-year-old Sidney girl has led to the arrest of 36-year-old man.

News accounts say the teen sexted nude photographs of herself and engaged in sexually-based conversations with 36-year-old Kenneth Steffens.

The Sidney man was formally charged Friday with possession of child pornography.

"It's here, it's happening in Nebraska," said Lincoln attorney Karen Haase.

Haase, who deals with social media issues regularly, spoke to middle- and high-school students on Oct. 20 in Gothenburg and to parents during a special presentation that evening.

The attorney, who works for Harding & Schultz, spoke about cyber-bullying, sexting and the hidden dangers of social media networks.

"Social networking is an important part of kids' lives and parents need to be part of that," Haase said, adding that parents who are not on Facebook need to join.

Facebook is a social network service and website on the Internet which allows people to communicate with each other.

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Sexting

She described sexting—a combination of sex and texting—as an act of sending sexually explicit messages or photos electronically, primarily between cell phones.

Although the sexting incident in Sidney happened after her presentation, Haase said in a phone interview Tuesday that it points to the fact that inappropriate use of cell phones and the Internet is on the increase.

In fact, national statistics reveal these percentages for who's sending sexually suggestive photos:

39% of all teens

37% of girls

40% of boys

48% of teens say they have received sexting photos or messages

Haase shared an incident from Florida in which a girlfriend sent sexually suggestive photos to her boyfriend who forwarded the images to all of his contacts after he became angry with her.

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WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- 1. Talk to your kids about these issues—**Make sure they understand that nothing in cyberspace is private. Talk through possible consequences, both short and long term.
Check up on them. Many cell carriers allow web retrieval of all texts.
Two such products that retrieve messages are My Mobile Watchdog and Mobile Spy.
- 2. Know who your kids are communicating with—**It's important for parents to find out who their kids are talking to by checking their text messages, visiting their social networks and being aware of who they talk to in real life.
- 3. Place limits on electronic communication—**Don't let them charge their phone in their bedrooms.
Place computers in public parts of the house. Limit texting during meals, homework, etc.
- 4. Monitor your child's public posting—**Require them to "friend" you on Facebook. Monitor their Twitter, MySpace, etc. Google the names of your kids.
- 5. Set expectations and reiterate these expectations—**Discuss limits and reasons for them. You should live by those expectations as well.
Remind kids frequently of the limits.

When you find out that your child has been bullied, it's important to help them understand the offender's behavior and to help them feel safe. If you're not sure what to do, contact your child's school or a professional counselor. You can also contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-4-A-KID-SAFE for more information.