

Sending Out an SOS

The FBI's cyberbullying program helps educate students and parents about dangers online.

BY MORGAN TAYLOR



GARY WARNER'S DAUGHTER looked forward to graduating and moving away from people who tormented her. But the summer before she left for college, the 19-year-old committed suicide.

To honor his daughter, Warner, director of research in computer forensics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, hosts seminars to educate youth about cyberbullying and its harmful consequences. And he's not alone in that work; thanks to the FBI's Safe Online Surfing program, teachers and parents have tools to help children learn coping skills early.

The program, which is intended for children in grades three to eight, promotes "cyber citizenship" through friendly competition; the highest scorers can win trophies for their schools and a visit from the FBI.

"I think it's great they're doing it (the program) so young. It will prevent them from doing it (cyberbullying) in high school," Warner says. "If you can expose them to something so young, there is no such thing as a secret online. The main message is that it is not funny, kids are killing themselves over this."

FBI-SOS features FBI Cyber Surf Islands in which each island represents a different grade. Each island is taught by a different character, and offers lessons specific to the student's age to assist them in real-life situations.

Josh Klapow, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist with UAB School of Public Health, says early awareness and education is vital. The education should become more advanced as their age develops.

For example, the FBI-SOS program won't expose a third grader to the dangers of sexting because elementary school students aren't yet engaging in this level of social behavior, Klapow says. But as they become preteens, the lessons advance.

Visitors to the game's Tropical Island (geared toward third-grade students) learn they should never give out personal information. Third graders will also learn proper Internet etiquette and password protection and privacy. As students venture to each island more lessons will be introduced: Fourth graders will start to learn about reputable websites, fifth graders will begin learning about online predators, sixth graders learn the dangers of cell phones, seventh graders jump into social networking and eighth graders close it out with lessons about sexting.

Other lessons are repeated, maturing with each grade level. Information about cyberbullying is reiterated as the child gets older. Klapow says it's important to realize that parents may not recognize cyberbullying as easily as face-to-face bullying, and so FBI-SOS includes a parent



education component.

Technology has paved the way for tech-savvy, sophisticated and confident children, even while creating new avenues for dangerous situations. But FBI-SOS works to keep kids safe. All it takes is one click. ■

Details

Visit sos.fbi.gov for more information.