Juvenile Justice Vision 2020 Training Event
Sexting, Cyberbullying, and Risk Taking Behavior Online
May 8, 2014
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Adolescents and even young children are adept at online computer use when many adults are still catching up. In order to protect our children it is important for parents and child workers to understand what goes on in cyberspace, the risks youth face when online, and what we can do to help youth avoid these risks.

Controlling, or attempting to control, youth access on the Internet is not especially effective. An estimated 70% of teens can circumvent parental controls on computers and devices, and that percentage is growing. Further, there are now more mobile devices on the planet than there are people, so parents and other authority figures are often not present when youth are accessing the Internet. Educating youth about online risks, instead of just attempting to control access, is the key to helping youth stay safe online.

In the past a chief worry of parents was that youth would access inappropriate sites on the Internet, or that children would become unknowingly involved with child sexual predators. While those are still concerns, a growing and significant concern is the amount and types of personal information that young people put online that could lead to financial loss to families, cyberbullying, exploitation or victimization, or harassment. Personal information is generally shared via social media—an integral part of most youths' lives.

What young people, and many adults, fail to remember is that postings on the Internet remain there forever. Everything online is retrievable; once posted it does not go away. Also, total strangers can pose as "friends" on social media pages and other sites. It is not always possible to know for certain whom is on the other end of an online conversation. Adults are encouraged to remind youth often of those two facts. Risky behaviors that can lead to problems for youth online include:
- Posting provocative images—teach youth about the dangers of this
- Sharing passwords—teach youth to NEVER share passwords
- Harassment of others—this could cause irreparable damage to others
- Clicking on pop-ups—you don't know what you are accessing, including data miners
- Sexting—the information or pictures posted don't always stay with the initial recipient

Twenty-five percent of the high school students surveyed in one Michigan County said they had engaged in "sexting," texting sexual images and/or messages, with half of those admitting to

posting pictures where they are naked or semi-naked. Case histories and headlines list frightening examples where youths that "sexted" these photos were then the victims of harassment and cyberbullying when the photos' recipient forwarded the photos to others. The emotional toll when this occurs can be devastating. There are documented cases of teen suicide attributed to this. In addition to these immediate consequences, youth create an "online reputation" as a result of their online behaviors. This reputation could influence employment prospects and other relationships later in life.

Young people engage in sexting, typically, because they have been so deluged with sexual themes through the media that they are "normalized" to sexual behavior. In addition there is peer pressure to engage in the activity, and teens have not fully developed those parts of the brain that govern executive decision-making, and as such are more impulsive and are less likely to plan or anticipate outcomes.

Youth are perpetrators of online harm, as well as victims. Bullying is nothing new with young people. Bullying plus the Internet increases the impact of bullying exponentially. In the past the victim of a bully could find ways to physically avoid the bully. With the Internet, a "cyberbully" is ever-present, and his or her audience larger.

Signs that a youth is engaged in cyberbullying or other inappropriate or risky online behavior include:
- Youth using multiple accounts
- Excessive laughter when online
- Staying online late into the night
- Minimizing computer screen when adults get near

One of the most significant signs that a youth might be a victim of cyberbullying includes a youth suddenly not using devices.

Laws are slowing catching up with the many issues that have emerged with the advent of the Internet in general and social media in particular, however even effective and timely legal regulation cannot eliminate the risks posed to youth. Parents can make a critical difference by educating youth on safe Internet behaviors, and by monitoring the information being sent and received by youth on the Internet. Websites that can provide additional information for parents and youth include ConnectSafely.org and IKeepSafe.org