

ALSD Urges Parents To Pay Attention To Children's Online Activities

The Alta Loma School District has spent years working to get out in front of the national problem of bullying in schools. Through a host of programs that promote positive behavior and reward citizenship, ALSD schools have been at the forefront of bringing to light and addressing the physical, emotional and psychological damage that can result from bullying.

Programs to move students from violence, bullying and negative behavior toward respect, kindness and compassion are in place in one form or another at every school in the District. They offer evidence-based behavioral interventions and support systems and go by the names of Rachel's Challenge, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Safe School Ambassadors and a number of others.

And while the concerns are less pronounced at ALSD school classrooms and playgrounds, there remains great unease at schools around the country about bullying – specifically bullying done online through social media and texting.

Cyberbullying has become one of the most serious issues on school campuses everywhere today. Young people are tormenting one another on social networking sites and across the internet, leaving new scars of isolation, discrimination and despair.

Healthy RC and the City of Rancho Cucamonga recently hosted a free mental health symposium on cyberbullying to address the need for families to have resources and services to address cyberbullying. The symposium is part of Healthy RC's larger strategy and mental health campaign to increase awareness and build a community-wide culture of support around mental health.

"It's become something of an epidemic and a real problem," says Clark Morrow, crime prevention program coordinator for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department. "Regardless of the school, regardless of the age of the individuals involved, we see it everywhere. It's becoming a huge problem because it's affecting so many young people emotionally, psychologically. It's resulting in teenage suicide. We need to do something about it."

Morrow presented a detailed look at how teenagers and youngsters are using social media, and the impacts that could result in cyberbullying.

Morrow's presentation noted that 60 percent of parents underestimate how depressed, worried and lonely their children are on social media, and that 94 percent underestimate how much fighting and vicious bullying goes on in the social media world.

According to Healthy RC, recent studies show that at least 16 percent of high school students have been bullied electronically over the past 12 months.

“In the old days, if you were being bullied at school, you could still stay away from the bullies all weekend and not have to see them again until Monday,” says Morrow. “That doesn’t happen anymore, and today kids are being bullied 24/7.”

Morrow says parents need to take an active role in monitoring and controlling their children’s social media activities.

“One thing parents can do is go to a website called safesocial.com,” says Morrow. “It can tell you everything you need to do to control your kids and their use of social media and how they are abusing it.”

Some services on the Smart Social website are free, while there is a charge for others. The Alta Loma School District recommends parents and families use discretion with pay services and subscribe only those services they feel are appropriate for their own specific circumstances.

A University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine study revealed that the more time young adults spend on social media, the more likely they are to become depressed and suicidal. Of the subjects of the research, ages 19 to 32, those who checked social media most frequently throughout the week were 2.7 times more likely to develop depression than those who checked least often.

A study by Pittsburgh's Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health indicated that young adults who spent more than two hours a day on social media were twice as likely to show signs of social isolation than those who spent less than 30 minutes. And those who logged on as many as 58 times during a week were three times more likely to feel isolated than those who typically used social media once or twice a day.

The number of teens who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by more than 40 percent from 2000 to 2015, wrote Jean Twenge in the book “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Happy And Unprepared for Adulthood.” It’s not just a matter of fewer kids partying – it’s that fewer kids are spending their time hanging out together.

In a sample of children between the ages of 10 and 15 collected from 2010 to 2014, researchers found that spending one hour a day chatting on social networks reduced the probability of a kid being satisfied with life overall by about 14 percentage points. Their happiness was tainted by cyberbullying, constant comparisons and missing out on non-electronic experiences.

Morrow says that one of the things that fuels cyberbullying is something called FOMO – fear of missing out. Teens, in particular, are worried they miss something in their social circles, so they are repeatedly checking or posting to social media. When young people see a celebration they weren’t invited to, or view photos of someone else’s family vacation or trip, it can cause them to believe their friends enjoy a happier, more fulfilled life than they themselves do, he says.

Another significant finding from the presentation was that 73 percent of young people ages 18-34 would rather text than talk in person.

Texting and mainstream mobile apps are not the only places where children and teens are communicating. New apps are being created every day, and many not only lend themselves to cyber bullying, but they are designed specifically for it. Many of the popular apps, while not designed for bullying, also are easy for bullies to use, simply by commenting on videos, photos or posts.

Morrow says there are things to look for if parents suspect their child is being cyberbullied. He or she could act nervous or show anxiety when receiving a text, email or an instant message. The child may withdraw or lash out in anger toward family and others. If the student shows signs of depression, tries to find excuses to avoid school or spends less time or cuts out online devices, then he or she could be trying to avoid the confrontations altogether. Also watch for a child who shows suicidal thoughts or actions, has difficulty sleeping or experiences significant weight gain or loss.

Above all, Healthy RC encourages parents and family members to start the conversation with their children about the dangers of social media and cyber bullying and to visit www.HealthyRC.com for a complete list of mental health resources.