Arlington parents discuss danger of technology to kids

Arlington parents at "Connected Child" forum at Ottoson Middle School

By Monica Jimenez / Wicked Local Arlington

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Arlington, Mass. —

Total silence filled the Ottoson Middle School cafeteria Tuesday evening as some 45 parents watched a young girl on the screen, slowly flipping through a stack of flashcards she held in front of her face.

Through the large, awkward handwriting on the cards, the story unfolded: She had made the unwise decision to send someone a photo of her breasts. Soon it was his photo on Facebook. Social ostracism followed her from school to school, town to town, ending in isolation, physical bullying, self-harm – and suicide, said counselor Jon Mattleman, who addressed parents Tuesday, March 5, in a parent forum titled "The Connected Child."

"A generation ago, people would have talked about it [the girl's photo], but it would have died down," Mattleman said. "This had a life of its own, and a second and a third life."

Computers, mobile phones, websites and applications now enable the instant, widespread exchange of images and information among youngsters, which has completely changed the game when it comes to growing up, Mattleman said.

Egocentric, terrified of what's being said without them, hungry for social reward, and reluctant to delay gratification, teens are naturally hooked by social technology, Mattleman said. They spend an average of five hours per day in front of computers (10 hours, in some cases), and many have access to both texting and the Internet on smartphones, he said.

"Adolescence is really hard because kids feel judged all the time and they're exceptionally concerned with how they look and how they come across. They're self-conscious," Mattleman said. "Technology is magnifying the hardest part of adolescence: The cruelty and embarrassment. It's hard to feel safe and good and in control when the whole universe might witness your humiliation."

Teens on technology can get ugly, Mattleman said, recounting students who created websites to rate each other's attractiveness, sent photos of parties to people who weren't invited, and posted photos of fellow students with their underwear showing online.

What's more, kids can no longer run home and shut the door to keep the bullies out, Mattleman said: Facebook, called the new schoolyard for bullies, is available 24/7.

"It makes them feel anxious, like they have no place to go because they're terrified about facing the world," Mattleman said. I think anxiety is going to increase in this generation based on technology alone. Kids feel awful about themselves, which increases their chances of self-harm."

Further, teens' desire for reward overrides their recognition of risks, Mattleman said, and they don't grasp that their actions might have lasting consequences – such as being rejected for future jobs based on a beer can in a profile picture or an inappropriate comment posted by a friend.

And technology enable kids to coordinate their risky activities, Mattleman said, with the result that youngsters who own smartphones are twice as likely to engage in sex with someone they met online, as well as more likely to drink and use drugs.

But protecting youngsters from these threats isn't easy, Mattleman said. Asked who had had a cell phone in middle school, no hands went up. Laughter filled the cafeteria. Asked who knew what the website SnapChat was, all hands remained down. Few had been on the website Tumblr, and even fewer could spell it. Almost nobody had even heard of the website 4Chan.

"We're really immigrants to technology, as old folks," Mattleman said. "From Day One, kids are natives and we're really well behind. It's constantly changing; the old days might have been three weeks ago in terms of technology. Can we ever really catch up?"

To conceal their online behavior from parents, Mattleman said, youths use tricks ranging from multiple online profiles and friends-only privacy settings to clearing Internet browsing history and switching windows when parents come along.

Arlington parents had their own stories: One mother discovered her son had created another Tumblr account to get around her online curfew. Another child changed the name of his iPad to circumvent parental controls. Yet another hid pornography on a rarely-used computer, and another watched forbidden video games on Youtube.

"Their job is to outwit us and they spend a lot of time thinking about how to do it. They're really geniuses when you get down to it," Mattleman said. "Youths are smart, conniving and devious and one of their jobs is to get away from things."

Parents had endless questions: How to enforce technology rules at friends' houses? How to set an online curfew? How to limit screen time while maintaining a good relationship with the teen? How to accept technology and its risks as simply a part of life?

"A good technique is to come in and say, I'm a moron about technology. Just tell me 10 things I need to know about technology and I'm not going to say a word," Mattleman said. "They love teaching us. Let's give them the podium a little bit and let them lecture us. You'll be amazed."

Asking teens what single website or application they couldn't go without is another strategy, Mattleman said, followed by arranging for offline time and even taking away their phone.

"There are some instances in which we cannot allow them to make a mistake. In some instances, you just have to say no, I will not allow that to happen," Mattleman said.

One of the final note cards held by the girl in the video, identified as Amanda Todd, read: "I have nobody. I need someone." A sad face had been drawn beside the words.

"It's OK to be the most ogreish dad in Arlington. Our job is not to be their friend," Mattleman said. "Our job is to keep our kids safe. We take that really seriously. If they judge us as ogres, fine."