

Local physician says parental involvement makes for safer social networking in cyber space

by BREANN HOWELL
Editor

As many as one in three U.S. children have been ridiculed or threatened through computer messages, according to one recent health report.

Opportunities to interact online are constantly expanding, and children are one of the fastest-growing groups of participants in social networking communities.

Dr. Matthew Bartels, pediatrician with Lifetime Health Medical Group, has simple advice about social networking for parents: proceed with caution.

While youth may navigate the online jungle easily, including popular Web sites Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, they don't always do so safely, said Bartels, who has been discussing this issue with parents and patients — as young as age 8 — for the past five years or so.

"Even when kids are emotionally and mentally mature enough to be using social networking sites, they may not think about the risks of certain behaviors," he said. "The problem that I see is I'm not sure parents really recognize the effects fully with this sort of inter-

action online. There are definitely savvy parents out there, but I think this is an area where effects are not really known."

The risks of unsafe online behavior are both immediate and long-term, warns Bartels. Immediate negative outcomes can include cyber-bullying, when a child is victimized in front of a sprawling network of his or her peers.

"The Internet eliminates many of the social barriers that exist in real life, so kids feel they have the freedom to do or say things they wouldn't normally do, even things that are inconsistent with their personalities," said Bartels. "I think the first step is for parents to really educate themselves about what really happens online."

Though most people are aware of the dangers of Internet predators, Bartels said they should be more concerned with the insidious issues.

Families should be aware of the practice of data mining that has become popular with employers, colleges and universities, and even insurance companies. Some organizations are creating what are called "shadow resumes" by downloading content children

have posted online, according to Bartels. The thought is that this information can be sold and used in the future by companies and schools wanting to do background checks.

Risque photos, photos showing illegal behavior such as underage drinking or substance abuse, or even derogatory comments made to others can mean the difference between a young adult being accepted into their college of choice or getting their first professional job.

Though children may not even be aware of problems such as these, Bartels reminds parents that they may also be embarrassed to tell parents or adults about bullying or harassment issues they are experiencing online.

"There's a lot of internalizing of hurt feelings," he said.

Bartels said parents should not be afraid to say no to their children or put limits on Internet usage.

The doctor also has concerns about the long-term psychological impact of constant electronic communication, pointing to one patient who recently told him he sends 1,200 text messages a day.

"We all think of it as keeping in touch; in reality, I think we're going to see a lot more isolation," Bartels said. "Kids will only know how to interact with technology in the future. The psychological impacts may not be evident. In one way, technology has gotten ahead of us. Parents haven't had time to understand its impact or implement their own set of controls for themselves or their kids."

Bartels said parents should beware of a child who seems to be suddenly withdrawn or stops talking freely. Most pediatricians recommend limiting combined television, Internet and computer usage (unless being used for school work) to two hours per day, but Bartels said he generally believes less is better. He suggests a maximum of a half-hour of computer use per day, depending on children's other media usage.

Bartels outlines advice for parents to help their children have safe interactions online:

- Familiarize yourself with the sites your children use. Create your own account and add your child to your network.
 - Use parental controls to monitor your children's online activity, especially for younger children. A wide variety of software is available to do this.
 - Discourage handheld Internet access.
 - Keep the family computer in a central location in your home. Do not allow your child to have a computer or Web cam in his or her room.
 - Talk to your children about putting personal information online. Discuss the risks of specific types of information, such as phone numbers, addresses and even what school they attend.
 - Make sure your children understand the possible negative impact of posting risky content online. Get them thinking about the long-term implications for their education and future career.
 - Limit computer time. Instead, encourage face-to-face interaction with friends and family.
- "The bottom line is that parents should be involved in their chil-



Dr. Matthew Bartels

dren's online activity, with more involvement for younger children," said Bartels. "And no matter what age, kids need to understand safe behaviors for the Web sites they are using. I think there's a good use for these types of interactions, but everyone needs to take a step back and understand the impact of having our kids utilize technology in this way."

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents limit content access and play a very active role in online activity for children younger than age 10. AAP guidelines suggest parents begin talking to their children at age 11 about what personal information should not be given out online, as well as reminding older teens. For teens ages 15 to 18, AAP advises parents to define appropriate safety guidelines and be available to help their children avoid unsafe situations.

Visit safetynet.aap.org for more information.

Lifetime Health Medical Group offers pediatric care at four health centers in the Buffalo area. Urgent care for children and adults is offered on evenings and weekends in Amherst and West Seneca.

The Empire Drive Health Center is located at 130 Empire Drive, West Seneca, and the West Seneca Health Center is located at 120 Gardenville Parkway West.

(Editor's note: For more information on cyber safety, see story on page 11.)

Gov. Paterson proposes Flight 3407 Memorial Scholarship Fund

Gov. David A. Paterson was in Western New York last week to discuss his proposal for a Flight 3407 Memorial Scholarship to help ensure that the children of the victims of that tragedy will have the financial resources they need to access higher education.

The scholarship would go to the children and financial dependents of the 50 victims of Continental Flight 3407, which crashed Feb. 12 while en route to Buffalo-Niagara International Airport. The grants could be used for up to four years of undergraduate study at any public or private college in New York State.

"I cannot begin to imagine the deep sense of sorrow that the families who lost loved ones in this tragic event are now experiencing. But even in dark moments such as these, we must look forward to the future with hope," he said.

Paterson will advance this proposal as part of upcoming budget negotiations with the Legislature.

The Higher Education Services Corporation would administer the program, which would commence in the fall 2009 semester.

The initiative is modeled after the New York State World Trade Center Memorial Scholarship, which was established in 2002.

At a State University of New York or City University of New York school, the scholarship would cover the full cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, room and board, books, supplies and transportation. At a private institution, the grant would cover an amount up to the annual cost of attendance at a four-year SUNY institution, which currently totals approximately \$18,400.

A number of the victims of Flight 3407 had ties to institutions of higher education in New York. Many of these individuals were faculty members, students, employees, parents of students or alumni of some of New York's colleges and universities.