

Students Get Look at Tragic Effects of Bullying

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

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WASHINGTON TWP. Kait Sheeran doesn't have a Facebook page and she's pretty sure she won't want one when she gets older. The 11-year-old, along with her fellow sixth-grade students at Chestnut Ridge Middle School, were told of the dangers of cyberbullying and given lessons on how to handle those situations during a lesson on Tuesday afternoon.

The New Jersey Child Assault Prevent project, based out of the Education and Information Resource Center (EIRC) at the South Jersey Tech Park, tested out their new curriculum at the middle school. The program, called the NJCAP Cyber Empowerment Student Workshop, was formed in collaboration with a few Rowan University students who are studying education and technology.

"It's really serious stuff and it happens everywhere," said Kelsey Nelson, a senior education major at Rowan University. "And it's happening younger and younger."

While the students were just entering their pre-teen years, the issues of bullying through technology aren't unfamiliar to them. "They're very young. They're only 11, but they've been using this technology for years," said social studies teacher Nancy Bennings.

During the 45-minute lesson, NJCAP members discussed different means of bullying, whether its through text messages, chat rooms, social networking sites, or even online gaming.

Videos were shown, using real kids as examples of the effect bullying can have. One video told the story of Ryan Patrick Halligan, a middle-school student in Essex, Vermont, who committed suicide at the age of 13 after being ridiculed by peers at school and online.

Jeannette Collins, director of curriculum for NJCAP, said the effects of cyberbullying are widespread. To demonstrate this, she had the kids count off in threes, and told all the ones and twos to sit down, and have the threes stand up. That's the number of kids, she said, who are subjected to cyberbullying. And of those, half don't ever say anything about it, she said. But there are ways to stop it or prevent it, suggested Collins and Cheryl Mojta, also of NJCAP.

"Empowerment means you have a choice," Mojta said. Don't "friend" someone on Facebook if you don't know them, or if they're already bullying you. If it does happen, save the messages as evidence and tell an adult, whether it's a parent, teacher or guidance counselor. Or if it's happening in a chat room or during an online video game, log off, she said.

Bennings said educating the students at a younger age about the issues of cyberbullying including the dangers of sexting, which was also discussed, is important. "I think it's bringing to the forefront of their minds that this is a problem that they need to be aware when they're texting and using technology, that there are dangers as well as positive things about it," Bennings said.

Jake Hanzel, 11, said he learned a thing or two about sending photos over the Internet. "Once you put something out, it's going to stay out there," Jake said.

"I don't have a Facebook and I kind of learned after everything that can happen, I learned that it really wouldn't be good to have a Facebook," Kait said.

Luckily, Jake and Kait said they've never been subjected to online bullying, but now they're thinking about it. That's just what the Rowan students and their teacher were aiming for.

"They might not be into it now but next year the pressure will be more, and every year it becomes more and more of a danger for them," said Bennings.

"It's like drugs and alcohol," said Laura Gillan, a senior education major. "They're going to make their own decisions but the more you put it out there, the easier it is for them to accept it and understand exactly what it is."