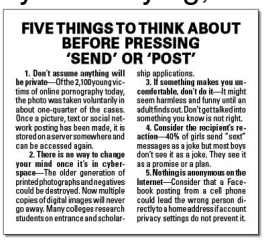
Expert reminds students to think before they send.

The facts can be a bit startling to unsuspecting old-school adults:
At least one in four students between the ages of 11 and 19 has been bullied using an electronic device and 65% of all students know someone who has been cyber-bullied.
Approximately 20% of all middle and high school students have sent sexually explicit photos to someone and 39% of all teens have forwarded a text or e-mail message with sexual content.

The vast majority of young people with Internet Facebook accounts will accept all friend requests regardless of whether they personally know the inquirer or not.

It's the world today and it's for real, even in small-town Nebraska.

Karen Haase, an attorney with the Lincoln law firm of Harding & Shultz, spoke candidly to Gothenburg and Brady high school students on Oct. 20 about the troubles and consequences of cyber-bullying, sexting and the hidden dangers of social media networks.



FIVE THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE PRESSING 'SEND' OR 'POST'

1. Don't assume anything will be private—Of the 2,100 young victims of online pornography today, the photo was taken voluntarily in about one-quarter of the cases. Once a picture, text or social network posting has been made, it is stored on a server somewhere and can be accessed again.

2. There is no way to change your mind once it's in cyberspace—The older generation of printed photographs and negatives could be destroyed. Now multiple copies of digital images will never go away. Many colleges research students on entrance and scholarship applications.

3. If something makes you uncomfortable, don't do it—It might seem harmless and funny until an adult finds out. Don't get talked into something you know is not right.

4. Consider the recipient's reaction—40% of girls send "sext" messages as a joke but most boys don't see it as a joke. They see it as a promise or a plan.

5. Nothing is anonymous on the Internet—Consider that a Facebook posting from a cell phone could lead the wrong person directly to a home address if account privacy settings do not prevent it.

Being a school attorney, those are topics the University of Nebraska law grad said she deals with regularly.

Cyber-bullying

Cyber-bullying is defined as the use of technology such as a computer or cell phone to engage in deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior by an individual or group with intent to harm others.

"It's the same kind of behavior that used to happen 20 years ago in the school hallways but with a phone involved it's much easier to catch," Haase said.

And the consequences can be steep, both in school and by the law.

Haase said Nebraska teachers and administrators are obligated by law to report all known cases of cyber-bullying and every school district is required to have a policy addressing it.

Even if the cyber-bullying starts at home, it's going to spill over into the school, she said.

One student in Seattle, WA, who created a Facebook page with intent to bully a classmate, was punished with a school suspension, along with 28 other students who accessed the page.

Parents of bullied students have sued the offender's family and so have threatened teachers. Some sizeable civil settlements have been awarded.

Law enforcement officials in Alabama even went so far as to charge one student with making terroristic threats after a MySpace message warned another student that a bomb may explode in his locker.

“Something you post because you’re angry or frustrated can really blow up in your face later,” Haase said.

Sexting

Sexting is defined as the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photos electronically, primarily between cell phones.

Haase said 48% of all high school students have received a sexually explicit photo by cell phone.

“Their parents are often clueless,” she said.

The situation often begins between a boyfriend and girlfriend, the attorney said.

Pictures are exchanged in what the teens tend to believe is a forever relationship. When it ends, one or the other gets angry and forwards the nude photos to a bunch of friends.

“There’s no way to undo it,” Haase said.

Charges can include creation, distribution and possession of child pornography, she said, and convictions may include lifetime sex offender registration requirements.

Possession of sexting images for someone 19 or younger in Nebraska is a Class IV felony. If possessed by someone older than 19, it is a Class IIIA felony and punishable by up to five years in prison with sex offender registration requirements.

“The thing about Nebraska is that someone convicted of sexting is treated the same as a pedophile

Find the complete story in our print edition. Receive the entire issue of the Gothenburg Times on-line in PDF format each Wednesday for only $25 per year. Call 308-537-3636 to subscribe.