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LOCAL

Former investigator warns parents of dangers kids face online



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PORT CLINTON - Having investigated internet crimes against children for over a decade, Scott Frank knows the constantly evolving dangers kids face every time they go online.

Frank, who spent 36 years in law enforcement, shares his knowledge of the many risks children of all ages face on the internet with both parents and students through his Digital Empowerment Project.

Through the project, Frank provides in-depth and engaging informational presentations to schools and communities on the topic, including a presentation to parents at Port Clinton High School on Wednesday.

Frank brings a unique perspective, both as a computer forensics expert and an investigator who spent thousands of hours immersed in the ever-changing online landscape, from social media to the dark web.

As part of his work investigating internet crimes against children, Frank would create profiles posing as children on internet platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and others. It would not take long to receive messages from predators.

“Going where the kids go, doing what the kids do, and unfortunately, interacting with the same risks and issues that our kids are dealing with,” Frank said. “For 12 years — several thousand hours — this was my world.”

Of the nearly 4 billion internet users, Frank said every minute of every day there are an estimated 2.5 million predators targeting children online.

One of the major concerns Frank has found is that the kids tend to know more about the internet than their parents do.

That is a problem, Frank said, because the first step he recommends to parents addressing these issues is to understand their child's digital world, which will be different for a teen boy than it is for a girl in middle school, or vice versa.

"The majority of the kids I talk to are not getting the support system from their parents. Shame on us. We've got to do better," he said. "Our kids are making risky decisions, getting hurt, getting influenced by this digital world."

While parents essentially compete with the six to eight hours of screen time kids spend on average in front of internet-enabled devices, Frank stressed that it only takes one post to potentially change a child's life forever.

"Your challenge as a parent is simply one post at a time," he said.

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Carrie Sanchez, principal of Port Clinton Middle School, said kids are learning technology at a much faster rate than parents can keep up with, but having resources like Frank's Digital Empowerment Project can make the difference.

"We all grew up in a time where this was not an issue," Sanchez said. "Our kids are growing up in a time where this is their world."

The best resource for a parent to learn about that digital world is their child, Frank said, by communicating with them openly and setting expectations supported by rules.

Frank points out, however, that kids are learning ways to hide certain aspect of their digital world from their parents.

Among the online tricks are creating multiple Instagram accounts, referred to as "Finsta," installing covert apps that are hidden on a device, or using apps that encrypt and automatically delete messages after they are sent, including Snapchat, WhatsApp and even Facebook.

Many apps also have geo-location services that display exactly where a user is using device's built-in GPS, which Frank said predators try to take advantage of.

Parents need to let their children know that even apps with disappearing messages, such as Snapchat, can pose the risk of permanence, Frank said.

"Sexting," sending nude photographs online, among minors is a felony crime and when those photos are shared, Frank said they may reach the "dark web," where it is impossible to ever

get them back.

The “dark web” refers to websites, pages and protocols, which are not indexed by Google or other prominent search engines, harboring many illegal online activities.

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Frank points to several internet trends that are important to recognize, such as increasingly intimate online relationships, even among otherwise strangers, brevity, anonymity and a lowered standard for friendship online.

He also notes that every child needs belonging, recognition and affection. And if they're not getting it at home they can look elsewhere.

“Are you as a parent and as a family providing that to them in a healthy way? Because if you don’t, the internet will and it’ll be less than healthy,” Frank said.

While Frank stresses that it is absolutely reasonable for parents to limit when, where, how and why their children use the internet, there are ways to encourage them to make constructive of of their time online.

Challenge them to invest their time, inspire others and impact their future in a positive way, he said.

Frank’s next Digital Empowerment Project presentation for parents is at Clyde High School on Tuesday, Jan. 30, from 7 to 9 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more information, visit www.digitalempowermentproject.com.

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