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Frank talk for parents about the internet at BGHS

By Marie Thomas-Baird, Sentinel-Tribune Education Editor
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File. Scott Frank, a retired Ohio Internet Crimes Against Children Investigator, points to a power point display while speaking to parents at the Performing Art Center located on the campus of Bowling Green High School Monday night.
Photo by J.D. Pooley/Sentinel-Tribune

Parents need to be tuned in not tuned out to what their children do on the internet.

Two dozen people attended a Digital Empowerment Project held Monday in Bowling Green City Schools' Performing Arts Center. Another 40 watched the program via video.

Scott Frank spent two hours discussing dark web risks, online relationships and privacy and how parents can talk to their child about the risks involved with apps.

"I tempered my expectations a long time ago," said Frank, who is a former Wood County Sheriff's Office deputy. "If one parent leaves here more educated, that is worth it."

He told his story of what he did while serving.

"I was a kid online for 11 years posing as a teen in the digital world," Frank said. "Some of it made me go home and cry. The worst job ever,"

His online profiles were three girls and one boy, all under the age of 15. While posing as a child, he said he was laughed at, stalked, took hits to his self-esteem and sent nude images.

"I wanted to quit a million times but reminded myself if they weren't talking to me, they were talking to a real 12-year-old," Frank said.

Parent your child first, then their device, he said.

"I want you to spend your time on what you know best. I have a hard time keeping up with a teen's digital world and I do this full time. You're not going to be able to do it. But what you're an expert on is parenting."

Frank provided parents with a STARTER strategy: Strategy, talk appropriate, review, technology, embrace, resources.

Parents need to be educated and involved in what their child does online. They need to talk to their teen, and start with "I love you," Frank said. Then go for "the big ask."

Ask them to tell you about their digital world and who they are talking to.

"Kids are looking for this conversation," Frank said.

If a teen wants no part of the conversation, that is a red flag. Take the phone immediately, he said.

"More parents need to be more involved and have the guts and courage. I think that is good parenting," Frank said.

Appropriate conduct includes talking to your child about expectations. Define appropriate access, manage screen time and support it with consequences. Continually review apps, purchases, content, friend requests, usernames and password.

Technology support includes Bark, Qustodio, and Disney Circle.

Every a user agrees to an app's terms of service, that app then has access to contacts and shares information with other app users.

Snapchat has a GPS feature that can track users and can't be turned off.

Limit the number of apps on the child's phone and vet them all, along with your kids, Frank said.

Embrace all the good stuff on the internet, he added.

Kids need to understand what they put online today will affect their future.

The parents-only program on Monday covered stories of the surface web, the deep web and the dark web.

On the dark web, the going rate to have someone killed is $23,000 and there is an unlimited supply of pornography and child porn.

If you hear your student talk about "Tor" or ".onion," they are referring to the dark web, Frank said.

Tweens between the ages of 8-12 spend 4.44 hours online a day while teens aged 13-18 spend 7.22 hours.

"If we are not careful, we're going to let this generation of kids get lost in this internet abyss," Frank said. "This is an issue that we as a society are not talking about enough. Your kids are constantly being exposed to inappropriate behavior."

Kids have self-esteem issues, depression, anxiety, loss of real-life balance, and that goes back to how long they are spending on the internet, he said.

Children are at risk because they are social bugs and if adults don't meet their affection needs offline, they will find it online.

"If you don't parent your kids, someone else will. Predators feed kids' social needs because they are tech savvy and kid savvy."

Online porn is prevalent, and 90% are teen male users and 30% are teen female users.

"It's not a matter of if your kids are going to be exposed to porn, it's when," Frank said.

Up to 20% of kids are involved in an online relationship because that is where they find predators who exploit their social needs.

"I think this is an understated problem," Frank said. "If a teen girl is lacking in self-esteem, they are susceptible.

"This is my world. This is what your kids aren't talking about."

Bowling Green High School Principal Dan Black said early in the school year, they gave a needs assessment survey to students. The information they received was that kids were struggling. Sessions were held Monday for students, covering digital empowerment, body image, self-esteem, healthy relationships, and drugs, alcohol and addiction.

"They didn't' want to be there as the day started, but as the day ended, they were very happy they attended those sessions," he said.

Frank, a 1978 BGHS graduate, presented to students during the day on Monday. He said what he had to say was just as important to students.

Black said the presentations helped, and added two seniors came up to him and told him they wished they would have heard these messages when they were freshmen because it would have helped them navigate high school.

Michelle Swain, who has one child in seventh grade, said the information she heard was insightful.

She said her daughter plays Roblox, which is an online game that allows players to create their own games which can then be played by other users.

"I'm thinking it's just innocent robots, but then you start to see that … it's on the internet. I thought it was innocent and it could be," Swain said.

She said she has her daughter's sign-in information and does spot checks on the phone.

Swain, who has experience in law enforcement, said what she heard was confirmation of the stories that incidents, such as sex trafficking, are still going on and her daughter is 12.

"That could be her as well, very easily," she said.

Now living in Oak Harbor, Frank founded the Digital Empowerment Project in 2017. He has four internet-savvy children.

"It's not easy being a digital dad," he said.

After 40 years in law enforcement – including as a D.A.R.E. officer – he has rejoined the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department.

All his students had something in common: They were on their own, making choices and not the best ones.