Trying to stay ahead of students

Kentucky School Advocate, April 2015
By Jennifer Wohlleb, Staff Writer

When it comes to technology, parents are still parents, even if their kids know more about the subject than they do. That's why parents and educators need to take charge and stay educated about what their kids are doing online, said Karen McCuiston with the Kentucky Center for School Safety.

"When I talk to parents, they are deer in headlights. They don't understand the magnitude of what their students can do, are doing and what apps are out there helping them to do it," she said. "We have to educate our parents to understand what their child is doing."

It's not always as simple as being your child's "friend" on Facebook or following his or her Twitter or Instagram accounts, although that is imperative, too. McCuiston said adults need to understand there are apps for electronic devices designed to help kids hide whatever they are doing online.

"There's an app out there called, SpyCalc, or as I call it, the how-to-hide-my-porn-app," she said. "It will give you a folder, a locker that you have to have a four-digit code to get into, but SpyCalc (looks) like a calculator on top. We had kids in one district who were using that to hide their sexting … and these are middle school kids."

That's just one of many apps designed to fool parents. That's why McCuiston encourages them to look through their children's cellphones, tablets and computers on a regular basis.

"One of the things I really push is having all the chargers in the parent's bedroom and every night when you go to bed, collect every device," she said. "Yours should be turned off and being charged and theirs should be turned off and being charged; nobody needs it at 2 o'clock in the morning.

"And I tell parents every night when they collect the phones for charging, check for new apps and talk to your kids and ask, 'What's this app?' And let them tell you and if you need to, go and do some searching about it on Google."

She said adults need to understand how important technology is to students and why they may be reluctant to share that they are having a problem, when the solution may seem simple to adults.

"A lot of kids are afraid if they come to you, you'll take away their cyber tools because the easiest answer for you is, if you don't see it, it won't bother you," McCuiston said. "Your thing is, you're going to keep them from being on the Internet, and they know that and have already thought, 'It will look like my fault,' or, 'It will be my devices that will be taken away even though the other person is at fault.' So they won't tell you and try to deal with it themselves, which is not the thing to do, but they're afraid of the punishment. And it's not a punishment, but it's the way you're dealing with it and you're not dealing with it in a way that is acceptable to them. And they don't have to be seeing it (the online bullying) for someone to be telling them about it. It's still going to be there."

And if parents or teachers see a problem developing, she encouraged them to get involved immediately.

"I think cyberbullying is a lot of misunderstood messages," she said. "I think a lot of it is someone said it in a sarcastic way when they were typing it, but because of the syntax or tone, it might not have been taken that way online; or they got an autocorrect and put a word in there that they hadn't planned on putting out there. I think a lot of the friendship or acquaintance cyberbullying – and a lot of it is very purposeful and very mean – but there is a portion that if you went straight to the person and asked, 'Did you mean what this says?' if you could settle some things before you start popping back at them, you might stop it before it becomes something very ugly."

Curbing cyberbullying is not only good for students in the long run, it's also good for education.

"It's very basic, and if we can control the bullying, the feeling of respect among our students and our staff, we can do so much teaching and reaching our goals," McCuiston said. "We have freed up so much more time (for teachers) because we're not having to deal with all these other things. If we can, educate our people to look for the small things before they escalate."