

NORTH HUNTERDON HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents and Guardians:

Any parent who has teenagers has heard about websites like MySpace.com, StudentCenter.org, Xanga, and Blurty.com. Even adults who are not terribly knowledgeable about computers have heard terms like “online journal” and “blog” because they have become part of our children’s everyday conversation. Young people see these sites as wonderful avenues for expressing themselves, as well as for staying in touch with friends and meeting new ones. AOL’s purchase of BeBo, a smaller social network site, for 850 million dollars is an indicator of the power of these sites and the revenues they are capable of generating.

Teens can spend hours creating their personal profiles on MySpace and other online “communities,” posting photos and favorite sayings, typing in their musings, their likes and dislikes, their hopes, disappointments, and fears. While these sites prohibit use of last names and other identifying information, many teens ignore the rules because the sites do not monitor for violations. Also, most teens believe that if they designate their profiles as “private,” they are safe from those predators who troll the Internet. As a result, many teens ignore the basic advice we parents give them. They post all kinds of personal information, including their names, their high schools, their home towns, their interests, their sports, etc. Friends can view profiles with the click of a mouse, but so can anyone else with a computer and an Internet connection. Savvy predators can get into anyone’s profile, even private ones, and start up online “friendships” with unsuspecting adolescents. Our children do not wish to put themselves at risk when they use these sites, but the dangers are real.

The New Jersey State Police Cyber Crimes Unit recommends the following online safety measures:

- Do not allow computers in young people’s bedrooms. The computer should be in a public location in the home. (NJ State Police consider this as their most critical piece of advice.)
- Teenagers should know that their parents are checking their activities online. Check the computer’s history regularly. Consider installing monitoring software.
- Check MySpace and other such sites to see what your children have posted online. Ideally, have students remove their profiles. Instead, they can use safer methods like instant messaging (IM) and email to stay in touch with their friends.

Online predators are not the only danger. Cyberbullying has fast replaced playground shoves. The frightening rise in online bullying—cyberbullying—affects many students and even adults. Teens use the anonymity of the Internet to spread rumors and gossip about acquaintances, send offensive messages, post embarrassing information and pictures, even break into other teens’ accounts to pose as them to send out messages that can ruin friendships and reputations. Parents can help their children, whether victims or perpetrators, by knowing what they are doing while online.

If your child is being harassed by a cyberbully, experts in this area suggest the following advice to teenagers:

- Ignore the online comments and especially don’t retaliate. Bullies will get bored and move on.
- Contact the police if someone threatens you.
- Don’t post or send information that others could use against you.
- Do not write anything on the Web that you do not want a future employer to read. That information remains in cyberspace.

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- If you are being harassed online, save the evidence, and try to figure out who the cyberbully is.
- Block communications. Remove the person from your “friend list.” Save any comments that are threatening in nature.
- In some cases, when the young person knows the name of the bully, tell him or her to stop. That takes away the “I didn’t know I was upsetting you” excuse.
- Contact the parents of the online bully and ask for their help in stopping the harassment. Send any inappropriate emails or IM’s to the parents as well. It is unlikely that they know about them.
- Report bullies to the website, Internet Service Provider or cell phone company.
- Check out MySpace Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.
- <http://www.stoptextbully.com/> is another useful resource.
- <http://www.netsmartz.org/> has numerous resources for parents, students, teachers, and law enforcement.
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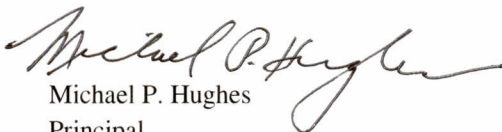
We all love our cell phones. They have made our lives easier and more efficient. Just as the other technologies discussed in this letter, cell phones also have the potential for harm. Recently, a 15-year old Ohio girl took nude photos of herself and sent them by cell phone to several male friends. She was arrested and charged with distribution of child pornography. The police are considering possession of child pornography charges for the boys who received the photos. Under Megan’s Law, all participants could be subject to being placed on the state’s sex offender registry if convicted. In Pennsylvania, a nearby school dealt with a similar situation, with pornographic images and videos of an underage girl being sent via cell phone all over the school. These are not atypical events anymore. In fact, there is a new term out there for sharing salacious pictures and explicit text messages—“sexting.” Police departments across the country are investigating “sexting” because it is illegal to acquire, possess, or distribute nude or semi-nude images of children under the age of 18. Those who do so can be charged with possession or distribution of child pornography. Sexting can ruin lives. Talk to your children about these issues. Let them know where you stand and what type of behavior you expect from them.

Approximately 75% of disciplinary referrals at North are related to misuse of technology. Please be reminded that state law and Board of Education policy require that cell phones are to be off during the instructional day. Also, iPods may be used with teacher permission in study halls only. For safety reasons, they should not be worn at other times. Below is an excerpt from the North Hunterdon Student Parent Handbook regarding improper use of electronics.

- Any use of cell phones is prohibited during the instructional day (7:15 AM—2:30 PM). Cell phones will be confiscated from students using them outside the designated times. Cell phones should remain in the students’ backpacks until dismissal. Use wall clocks and wristwatches, not cell phones, to look up the time.
- Cell phone use in school produces the following consequences:
 - 1st offence: phone is confiscated for one week/1 extended detention
 - 2nd offence: phone is confiscated for 2 weeks/3 extended detentions
 - 3rd offence: phone is confiscated for one month/5 extended detentions
 - 4th offence: phone is confiscated until the end of the school year/5 extended detentions
- **Students may not use iPods, radios, CD players, or other media devices during class or while walking in the halls.** With permission, students may use these devices during study hall or in the cafeteria. Outside of these instances, electronic devices will be confiscated and turned over to the disciplinarian, and parents will be contacted to pick up the items.
 - 1st offence: device is confiscated for one week/1 extended detention
 - 2nd offence: device is confiscated for 2 weeks/3 extended detentions
 - 3rd offence: device is confiscated for one month/5 extended detentions
 - 4th offence: device is confiscated until the end of the school year/5 extended detentions

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your child’s guidance counselor.

Sincerely,



Michael P. Hughes
Principal