Are your kids safe on the Internet?

Davis tackles issue with new i-SAFE Program

http://www.davisenterprise.com/articles/2007/11/06/features/055fea.txt

By Julie Rooney/Davis Enterprise staff writer
Tuesday, November 6, 2007

It was an all-too-familiar story: A grown man posing as a teenager on MySpace lured a girl to meet him.

But this time, the incident, two months ago, hit too close to home. The girl, just 11, lived in Sacramento. The man was a 29-year-old UC Davis student assistant. The girl was found the next day by police - in the man's Davis apartment.

Could this ever happen to your child? Davis school officials hope not, as the district launches a new cyber safety program called i-SAFE.

In the next few months, librarians at all of the schools in the district begin teaching i-SAFE, and some of the junior highs already are into their first lessons.

The curriculum covers key Internet topics, including personal safety, cyber bullying, intellectual property (plagiarism), predator awareness and Internet etiquette, AKA "netiquette." It's designed for fourth- through seventh-graders, and 10th-graders.

Librarian Wendy Chason, who will teach the program at Patwin Elementary and Holmes Junior High, says beginning in fourth grade is key.

"I think kids can understand the terminology," Chason says. "I think you can discuss the issues with the kids, and they get it."

Seventh- and eighth-grades are big Internet years as tech-savvy junior high schoolers spend their free time instant messaging, texting and visiting social networking sites.

A final refresher course is presented as students enter Davis High School.

 The lessons are designed to be interactive, including role playing, activity worksheets and survey assessments. While all of the modules will cover the same topic, the subjects are more mature and in-depth as children age. Chason says they are all kid-friendly and grade-appropriate.

"You could easily frighten a fourth-grader if you didn't do this just right, and they (i-SAFE) have figured it out," Chason says.

Schools all over the nation are teaching Internet safety through i-SAFE. Davis Joint Unified is the first district in Yolo County to offer the program, but according to Yolo County District Attorney Jeff Reisig, it won't be the last.

His plan is to use DJUSD as a template, and then urge other schools in the district to follow.

"We are pushing this issue as aggressively as we can with the (county) supervisors to try to form a partnership in the schools throughout the county," Reisig says.

And in the next couple of months, he plans to host town hall meetings on Internet safety throughout Yolo County.

"I think a lot of people are naive about what is going on on the Internet, and these town halls would seek to educate the community about what's out there and how we can work to keep our kids safe," Reisig says.

Jonathan Raven, assistant chief deputy district attorney, has been pushing for i-SAFE in the schools for a couple of years.

"I give DJUSD a lot of credit for finally deciding to implement this," Raven says. "It's a great thing for Davis as a whole - for the students and the parents."

One reason schools are implementing Internet safety curriculums is that cyber-savvy kids are quickly bypassing their parents' Internet IQs. It's the children who are embracing the new technology while parents are being left in the dust.

Says Raven, "Nowadays there are millions and millions of very young children who are on the Internet. These young children tend to know more about the Internet than their parents. It's probably true in my home."

Just as parents implement a "no computer in the bedroom" policy, kids head out the door with fancy cell phones with full Internet access. Parents can't keep up with the technology.

While Chason, the librarian, is aware that speaking to children about online predators may worry some parents, she says, "I think they need to understand that their children may not know that there are many dangers on the Internet. Our goal is to make children aware so they are safe and secure. That's why it's called i-SAFE."

Parents interested in learning more about the i-SAFE curriculum may call their school librarians to set up an appointment to view the manual. Information also is online at www.isafe.org.