

Program helps students deal with challenges of sexting, Internet abuses

WEST CHESTER, Pa. - Sister Margaret Rose Adams, a Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who is principal of SS. Simon and Jude School in West Chester, feels pretty comfortable around technology.

“I thought I was ahead of the curve,” she said, “but the children are so far beyond us.”

Today’s newspaper headlines and television reports bring a new set of challenges for 21st-century parents and their children - challenges that change practically every day.

On April 26, SS. Simon and Jude was the site of a two-part program titled “A Proactive Approach to Growing Concerns of Sexting (texting with sexually explicit content), Texting and Internet Abuse.”

Paul Sanfrancesco, director of technology for Garnet Valley School District, who for six years held a similar post with the Philadelphia Archdiocese, led two sessions discussing the topic. The first session was in the morning with students in grades six through eight. The second, at night, was for school personnel, faculty and parents.

Sister Margaret Rose said the students were very receptive.

“One thing I have much concern with is that there are so many ways to get on the Internet - computers, cell phones and iPods,” she said.

Sexual material that young people send via cell phones has become a national problem, leading to tragic results in some cases. Students are also involved in cyberbullying, a high-tech approach to a problem that has undermined education for generations.

Sister Margaret Rose estimated that 125 of the 150 students in grades six through eight possess cell phones. “A lot of times an older sibling gets a new phone and passes it down to a younger child,” she said.

Parents give cell phones to their children for safety reasons. A child can text a parent if there is an emergency, for example.

“You have to teach the appropriate use of cell phones,” Sister Margaret Rose said.

Sanfrancesco takes the positive approach in instructing students and parents about technology’s darker side.

“We’re not trying to scare the parents,” he said. “We are just giving as much information as possible to help them make decisions about their children’s use of technology. Kids have no fear. Technology is so huge. You have to embrace technology but understand what technology can do.”

Parenting in the 21st century, said Sanfrancesco, involves being aware of sexting and cyberbullying and dealing with it by monitoring your children’s use of technology and by exercising Catholic values.

“Parents send their children to Catholic schools for a reason,” said Sanfrancesco, the father of three children enrolled at St. Anastasia School in Newtown Square.

“Being a 21st-century student and a Catholic parent requires us to do more,” he added. “It’s against our religion to illegally download music from the Internet. Sure,

everybody's doing it. You have to make the connection between Catholic teaching and 21st-century technology. What you are doing has consequences."

Sanfrancesco said his sessions with students are more conversations than lectures. "It's interactive - they can question me," he said. He reminds the students that what they put in cyberspace stays in cyberspace.

"All these children are going to high school and college," he said. "They are leaving a digital footprint in their lives. You could have 1,000 friends on Facebook. When people look at your footprint, they can be making an assumption that may not be true."

How can young people determine if what they text or upload is appropriate? That's easy, Sanfrancesco said. "The question you can ask yourself is, 'Would you be embarrassed if your parents looked at your Facebook page?'"

Sanfrancesco also tells students to "Google your name and find out what's online about you."

Deb Bobrowski, president of the SS. Simon and Jude Home and School Association, attended the evening session along with about 100 others. "I walked away with tons of information I did not know," she said. "I recommend that other schools have these type of sessions for the safety of their children."