

Maine Sunday Telegram

November 27, 2005

Beth Quimby

Educators try to expose IM's dark side

By BETH QUIMBY, Portland Press Herald Writer

Copyright © 2005 Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc.

Amanda Thorpe has sworn off instant messaging.

Most of her friends spend hours after school each day in wildly popular instant messaging conversations. But Amanda, a 13-year-old eighth-grader at Winslow Junior High School, has retired her screen name, Mandagirl101.

She said she was turned off by the name-calling, gossip and crude language her friends were using. Since September, she has communicated with her friends only by phone or in person.

"I lost too many friends," she said.

Educators say they wish more young teens would follow Amanda's lead. They say instant messaging, known as "IM," has gotten out of control among middle school-age kids, especially girls. Some schools have started trying to educate students and parents on the dangers of instant messaging.

"What we end up having are kids who feel they are anonymous and send just nasty instant messages," said Stephen Bishop, principal at York Middle School.

Middle schoolers are using instant messaging to tease and bully. Their conversations are often filled with profanity, threats and sexual content that would make most parents' hair stand on end, said Cynthia Wilcox, a social worker at Gorham Middle School.



Blethen Maine News Service by Jeff Pouland

Winslow Junior High School eighth-graders Amanda Thorpe, right, and Morgan Ware chat after school. Amanda no longer participates in instant messaging conversations.

Educators say few parents have a clue that long after they have gone to bed, their children are messaging each other into the early morning. They come to school exhausted and bring their hurt feelings and negative experiences to the classroom.

Instant messaging was an overnight hit among teens when it emerged on computer screens about five years ago. Today, the Pew Internet and American Life Project concludes that 74 percent of teenagers online use instant messaging, compared with about 44 percent of adults.

The technology allows immediate text conversations between one or more users who are online simultaneously. Typically, an instant messaging program allows users to know which users from their private list are online. A message pops up on the screen when a user is trying to contact another user.

Maine's laptop program, which put a portable computer into the hands of every seventh- and eighth-grader for the past four years, is not to blame, educators say. Schools have added software that makes it difficult to install instant messaging. Schools also monitor students' online access during the school day.

Generally, instant messaging takes place after school on home computers. For many students who use it to stay in touch and discuss homework assignments, it can be a positive experience.

But far too often, educators say, the experience turns negative. Social status is a major concern for young teens. They want to be perceived as popular and part of the "in crowd." These teens can easily get caught up in an instant-message conversation that snowballs into taunts and threats.

INSTANT MESSAGING:

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR PARENTS

DO SET ground rules. Some experts advise parents to ban instant messaging until schoolwork is completed. Others argue that in today's world, multi-tasking is the norm. Be clear about whether your teen can indeed chat with four friends at the same time she's writing a term paper.

DO MAKE IT a house rule: Teens may send and receive instant messages only from people they know.

DO TALK with teens about the nature of real friendship. The online experience can be one way to deepen a friendship, but it shouldn't be the only form a friendship takes.

DON'T FEEL intimidated by technology. Many children know more than their parents about instant messaging. But parents who are awed by their kids' online proficiency are less likely to exercise proper oversight.

DON'T IGNORE warning signs. If your child is socially withdrawn or seems to prefer online chat to face-to-face relationships, it may make sense to impose restrictions on computer time or even to seek professional help.

Source: Familyeducation.com

"What happens is their messages become so distorted," Wilcox said. "This cryptic language they use, often things that should be more personal conversations between two people become conversations involving a dozen people."

Amanda Thorpe said she gave up instant messaging because some of her friends would pose as each other or cut and paste her conversations and send them to someone else. "You have no idea who is talking," she said.

Some schools are taking steps to deal with the negative side of instant messaging. The staff at York Middle School is planning a special night in February to teach parents about the technology and shed some light on the secret world of middle school instant messaging.

Mary Madden, an assistant research education and human development professor at the University of Maine, co-wrote a program with Lyn Mikel Brown, professor of education and gender studies at Colby College, to help middle school girls stop bullying each other.

The program teaches girls to become allies rather than compete and criticize each other.

"Instant messaging is one way they engage in girl fighting, and what makes it most difficult for schools is it happens out of their sight," said Madden.

She said it is very difficult for adults to intervene. The medium is pervasive, and teens want their parents to stay out.

"Adults have very little power here," she said.

Educators say monitoring the use of instant messaging can be a challenge for parents in part because it is free and easy to use. And parents who intervene should expect resistance.

"You can download that software very quickly and delete very quickly," said Kim Brandt, principal of Greely Middle School in Cumberland. She said the school's staff is reviewing its decision to allow e-mail access on student laptops because of concerns that students are using class time to e-mail their friends.

Madden said young teens also can help themselves. She said Amanda Thorpe's strategy is a perfect example of what girls can do.

"Just step in and outright refuse to participate and say that is what you are doing. Refuse to pass along a message or refuse to reply or share gossip, those are all ways girls can intervene," she said.

Some parents say they pay close attention to what their children are doing online and have no qualms about invading their privacy when it comes to instant messaging.

Patti Pacillo has set rules for her 11-year-old daughter, Sadie, a sixth-grader at Memorial Middle School in South Portland who has been using IM since she was in fourth grade. "And I monitor," she said.

Thorpe said having parents who backed up her decision to retreat from IM has helped her resolve. Her mother, Tasha Charette, said that with four children, instant messaging could be a convenience because they could talk to their friends without tying up the phone. But it was easy to ban instant messaging from the house once she learned what it was all about.

She said she was horrified at the nasty comments and the sexual content. "A lot of parents would be disgusted," she said.

Staff Writer Beth Quimby can be contacted at 791-6363 or at: bquimby@pressherald.com