

Parents Receive Online Tips

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Local parents were able to learn more about the dangers their children could be facing online during a community meeting on Tuesday night at the Estevan Comprehensive School.

Staff Sergeant Ron Weir, from the Saskatchewan Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) Unit, explained the issues and perils that kids are getting involved with through various social media sites and internet chat rooms. He also spoke to parents about their responsibility to monitor the sites children are visiting on computers, smart phones and other devices.

“We love our kids and we trust them, but it's the person on the other side of that computer that they're talking to, that you have to be aware of,” Weir told *Lifestyles*. “Parents just have to be a little more aware of who these kids are talking to, or communicating with, because they're going to be taken advantage of.”

He was joined by Corporal Corey Patterson and Constable Peter Froh, who are also part of the ICE unit.

Weir said child exploitation has been an issue for years, but it's being identified more consistently now.

“It's definitely something that's there, because it's an easy access for everybody to use the internet, and the different media sites,” said Weir. “It's becoming more common and more normal for kids to use it.

“The kids just don't understand the ramifications and the dangers involved of using it in an inappropriate manner.”

Many parents don't realize the problem is this significant, either, Weir said. People might hear of incidents happening through the media, but they doubt it could happen to them.

“We deal with it in all walks of life,” said Weir. “It's here, and it's going to be here for a long time.”

The ICE unit conducts more than 200 investigations each year, and likely laid around 300 charges in 2014, for such infractions as possessing and accessing child pornography or for child luring. Some of the investigations and charges were in the southeast.

Weir expects the number of charges will continue to increase, as technology continues to evolve. It is becoming easier to access the material, but police do have a greater ability to track the offences.

“Our resources are, hopefully, going to be growing as well, in regards to investigators and forensic technicians,” said Weir. “That's going to help us curtail this issue. In the long run, our numbers are definitely going to increase as well.”

The ICE unit includes members from the city police departments in Regina, Saskatoon and Prince Albert, as well as the RCMP. It has eight investigators and two forensic technicians who work for Weir fulltime. They also receive assistance from two RCMP forensic technicians in Regina.

An attentive crowd of about 30 people attended the event. They were able to ask questions throughout the night, but Weir said they're typically amazed once they find out the extent of the issue.

“We talk about all the different issues that we're dealing with, as well we'll show them some different ... live things in regards to people accessing child pornography as we're speaking right now,” said Weir. “So they're amazed at those kinds of things, because we have the technology that can track that kind of stuff.”

The ICE unit makes about 50 presentations each year across the province.

The Envision Counselling and Support Centre and the Estevan Police Service sponsored the parents night.

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