

A few years ago, the Harborside Leadership Team and the PTSO wanted to raise awareness about dangers that our students face, and, we also agreed that some issues are so significant and/or sensitive that they are best handled at home. Therefore, the idea of "Pete's Tough Topics" was born. Our office leadership team decided that it is time, again, to send out this informational email. If there is a topic that needs addressing, please contact the main office or reply to this email.

We have an immediate concern that we want to share with you:



Today's Pete's Tough Topic: Cyber Bullying

We have become increasingly concerned about the online behavior of some students. This is far from just a Harborside issue, but we, too, have experienced many of these problems. In short, we believe there are a lot of risky and inappropriate behaviors happening online. We promise you, there are things happening out there that are sad and downright shocking. Please understand, we are not suggesting that your student is participating in these negative actions. In fact, we believe most of our students steer clear of these offensive situations. However, we do believe your kids are being exposed to some pretty dreadful things online, and we are sending this message probing you to please do all that you can to supervise what is happening on line.

Cyber bullying is a problem we have all heard about but we can tell you firsthand it rips your heart out when you read some of the cruel things kids in our community have written about other kids. These victims need our supervision and support! Many of these situations happen outside of school time using people's personal computers so they are not necessarily school related issues. However, as the adults in this community, we believe it is our moral responsibility to protect our kids from these situations. We cannot do anything unless we know.

Have you or your students thought about these questions -

- Are you watching for cruel or negative social behaviors online?
- Do you believe that your students will report cruel behavior like this to you if they see it?
- Do our students understand that even if the victim(s) appear to be participating and laughing along, that does not mean it wasn't hurtful. Speaking from experience, there are a lot of overweight kids over the years who have laughed off the fat jokes in an effort to save face - after all, what else can they do?
- After extended periods of such teasing, do we think about the effect it has on the person hearing it?
- Do our kids think about, "How would I feel if that kid committed suicide and I didn't do anything to help or safeguard them or maybe even contributed to it?"

Do you know what "sexting" is? Unfortunately, anyone that works in a school or a police department knows about this all too well. It is a HUGE problem that is becoming more and more prevalent! Sexting is the sending of sexually explicit

photos, images, text messages, or emails by using a cell phone or other mobile device. It can include photos but it is also the engaging in sexually explicit conversations.

Here are some questions about this practice that we would like you and your students to consider:

- Do our kids know that “Sexting” is a crime? Think about it: underage kids and nudity. This is an HUGE problem!
- Do all of our kids understand the seriousness of this crime? – Sending pictures that include nudity of a minor could result in felony charges.
- Do they understand the potential consequences?
- Do they understand the charges they could face if they forward, or even just show a few people, an inappropriate picture to someone else?
- Do our kids even know what to do if they receive a picture like this? (This is an important moment that has to be handled correctly. A situation that they did not ask for, yet need to handle maturely!)
- Do our kids know that once they hit send they cannot unsend or retrieve a picture back. Pictures become generally permanent once we hit upload, send, or click to share. Unfortunately, we cannot retrieve these pictures or stop them from reaching unintended locations or end up in the wrong hands.

Finally, we just want to share that the overall language used in these sites is often atrocious. To us, it seems as though our kids are communicating in a largely unsupervised world that can gradually get more inappropriate and vulgar over time. I promise you, this is not just a problem that is limited to kids who sometimes get in trouble in school. We have spoken to some really good kids from really amazing families. Things at school and in the house are fine then one day someone captures a series of comments from them online and prints them out. Sadly, some of these moments end in a huge mess of tears, disappointment, and embarrassment. All because they thought that adults would never see the things they are saying because they are saying it online.

Like we mentioned earlier, we see this as a HUGE problem and we are pleading for increased supervision. Dangerous and hurtful things are happening in this online world. We all need to pay attention and be aware.

Here are some final/additional, important questions/thoughts to ponder with your students:

- Have you ever told your kids, do not EVER put something in writing that you want to remain private? When was the last time you told them this? – It is amazing advice!
- Do they know that Snap Chat pictures can and do live on for longer than nine seconds? We promise you, they do not always go away.
- Do our girls know what to do if a group of boys they like are pressuring them to do something against their character?
- Do our kids know what to do if they are pressured, or someone is threatening them, to post or do things against their character? Students face varying levels of social pressure, often from popular students or even adults.
- When is the last time our kids were told not to give out pictures or personal information in a chat room? Remember, really responsible kids in the past have agreed to meet a “new friend” in person. – This is so unsafe!

- Do your students know what a digital footprint is? Would they want a potential employer or college to see their Facebook page? Do they realize that the pictures their “friends” post online reflects on their character as well? People have been fired for Instagram, Facebook, and other social media posts. Their futures have been damaged as well.

- When you read all this, did you think, “My child would not do any of these things”?

Again, please remember we are not saying all of our kids are participating in these mean and dangerous behaviors. However, we do firmly believe that if they are regularly using social media, they have been exposed to, or are at least aware of most of these problems. Let’s not let our middle school and high school aged kids handle these problems on their own.

Finally, we really want to stress the point that we are sending this in an effort only to be helpful. We know that we have amazing families and students at Harborside. We know that much of this discussion is hard to hear and is potentially upsetting. As a parent, you might feel that some of it is not age appropriate for your kids. Just know all of that is completely understood. We are sorry for sharing such upsetting information, but burying our head in the sand and hoping that the problem does not grow worse here seems like an irresponsible choice on our part.

Thank you for all that you do for your kids and for our school. We appreciate your support beyond words!

Pirate Pete and Harborside Administration

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