

ARE YOUR CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE- CROCKETT EDUCATORS RECEIVE TRAINING

By Ron Barry

In the days when many of our teachers were children themselves, they used to be warned about “the creepy guy in the white-paneled van cruising around the neighborhood.” The emphasis, of course, was “don’t talk to strangers.”

But Jonathan “Andy” Hendrix – newly-promoted supervisor of the West Tennessee section of the Department of Homeland Security – has a different message for parents and educators today.

“If your child has a smartphone,” he says, “there are a bunch of creepy guys already sitting inside their bedroom.”

Hendrix was the featured speaker Tuesday at the Professional Development Day this week at Crockett County High School, where he spoke to high school and middle schoolteachers and administrators about the current state of child sexual exploitation going on in the United States.

It was an extremely sobering two hours, even to those listeners who thought they were already diligent in their knowledge of smartphone and online safety.

The message Hendrix brought was so sobering – and important – that Misty Bailey, Coordinated School Health Director for Crockett County Schools, has already invited him back to speak to parents on February 6 from 6:00 to 7:30 in the CCHS Little Theatre.

Hendrix, originally from Selmer, Tennessee, told Crockett educators that the rise of social media, smartphones, online gaming, and now – potentially an even bigger threat, the increasing use of artificial intelligence – has combined to make it easier and easier for child predators to infiltrate our students’ space.

Hendrix warned that if a child isn’t properly warned about the techniques predators use to establish contact and communication, he or she may unwittingly open a multitude of technological doors for the criminals to walk through. And often, Hendrix said, it’s by utilizing apps that are perfectly legal because they don’t use a specific identifier or show an ongoing criminal image.

The good news is that his department is stepping up efforts to catch and prosecute these criminals, bringing in their own technological experts themselves.

“There are wolves out there. Our children are the sheep. I’m the watchdog,” read one of the slides shown during the presentation.

Lest you think child exploitation is a problem only internationally or in America’s largest cities like New York and Los Angeles, Hendrix said he just arrested the owner/proprietor of the largest CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material) network in the world in the past few months – and he was located in Franklin, Tennessee.

The presentation by Hendrix covered everything from child online enticement to “sextortion” – a form of child sexual exploitation in which children are threatened or blackmailed, most often with the possibility of sharing with the public a nude or sexual image of them, by a person who demands additional sexual content, sexual activity, or money from the child – to a listing of the smartphone apps most predators are currently using to reach their prey.

“The average age of a child in the United States who receives their first smartphone is now 10 years old,” he said. “We have adults who get duped into these situations all the time. Do you think a 10-year-old child is going to have the discernment to avoid these criminals?”

Hendrix said a very common way that predators use is to target online gaming sites. They start out by playing the games against various children, slowly building volume and rapport, until a child reaches the point when they feel they’ve made a friend. That’s when the predator then begins using the “chat” portion of the game to learn locations, likes and dislikes, and any other information that may lead to successful exploitation.

But Hendrix also told of social media apps that students use which are little more than blatant gateways to abuse, even telling of one that uses cyberbullying in an attempt to shame their targets into committing suicide – for which the app’s “user” gains points to rise in status on the platform’s structure. Many other sites get into too much of an adult situation to discuss here, but that’s another reason Bailey has invited Hendrix back to Alamo to speak specifically to parents.

“Obviously, a lot of the material Andy presented here shocked us as educators, and we’re in positions where some of these situations shouldn’t surprise us anymore,” she said. “So how much more important is it that parents be informed on this topic, since Andy emphasized that the best instruction needs to begin at home?”

One of the best sources of information on child exploitation, Hendrix said, is <https://www.missingkids.org/home>, the website home for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The Department of Homeland Security will be coming out with its own new material sometime around April.

Until then, crockettcavs.net will continue to occasionally present informative materials on these subjects in an attempt to help parents and school personnel stay diligent in preventing exploitation locally.