Online Safety Cases – Brett's Experiences

Father – There was a lot of pressure from other gamers for his son to stay in the game because he was needed.

Son – This caused confusion and conflict for the young teenager due to his sensitive nature. He felt bad and became angry that he had to get off the game. A reliance on him by others to remain online was enough pressure for him to feel resentment toward his father.

Observations – The father took the time to understand why his son was acting out of character. Once he understood the problem and his son's perception of the situation, he was able to have a conversation and reassure his son.

The pressure is easy for the father to manage. **Turn the game off.** The son has rules that are there to support him and not to punish him. At some point, he has to get offline. That point is when his time is up or a parent says enough.

Principal – School policy written to deter inappropriate online behaviour:
  1 – Student(s) are identified for using foul or aggressive language towards other students online.
  2 – The principal prints a hard copy.
  3 – The principal meets with the child and sometimes their parents.
  4 – The principal hands the paper to the student and asks the student to read out loud in person what they have said online.

Outcome – No student has been able to read aloud the words they wrote online.

Observation – When children verbalise the words they chose to write, it sounds wrong, not natural. One older student broke down and cried as a result of embarrassment and humiliation. This is a good lesson about the false bravado and privacy of the cyber world. You are dealing with real people.

Principal — There was an incident of **sexting** involving children in the middle school. The teenagers were interviewed by the principal, who saw the images and texts. The information was passed on to authorities, as per their policy.

The students involved — Students were most concerned about the embarrassment when their parents found out, not police, school, or peer involvement.

Observations — This is important for parents to know regarding not only **sexting** but also **parental controls.** When kids know their parents can see and are paying attention, it helps the child make a good choice. Well, at least it may help.

Mother — Her son is part of a group of kids that have texting (using the phone, not Internet) groups. He receives hundreds of texts a day.

Son — He does not read all of the texts. He blocks or deletes many but feels he can't get out of the group because of peer group pressure. It takes up a great deal of time, and he worries that he's missing something or offending people. It has become consuming to try to keep up.

Observations — Nobody has bad intentions; it is just the pressure that is being placed upon this child. The parent must step in and have a conversation with the son about the benefits versus the cost of being involved in these text groups. She must help her son devise a workable solution, even if his out is "Mum said."

Parent – My son did well at school and started university. He was motivated and doing well. He gamed a bit during high school but not too much. He was living a healthy, balanced life. In his second year of Uni, his mother and I separated. There were arguments and ill feeling in our home. He is quiet and retreated. Tried to escape. We didn't notice. He spent more and more time in his room gaming. In a very short time, his grades slipped. Then he left Uni. He had no motivation to attend or do the work. By the time we noticed, it was too late. He wouldn't leave his room. He was aggressive and would be violent toward us when he couldn't get access to the games. He was stealing to fund his habit. He spent nearly every hour in his room. He was 20.

Observations – Your child's addiction can start anytime. Pay attention to time and how it is used. Set rules about how many hours a day/week are spent online (gaming, social media, all of it). And stick to it. Addiction happens swiftly. Not all gaming addictions start with a crisis. It can just as easily start because no one is paying attention or calling it out. Time limits are not optional. Children can't self-regulate when it is fun and stimulating. Parents must diligently monitor device use.

Principal – We experience a spike in poor online behaviour over the summer holidays. Not surprising really. We live in an isolated rural area, and it's really hot over the summer. The children choose to stay home in the air-conditioning and play online.

The students – Bored. At home, sometimes alone. Access to the world online. Online connection tends to be in writing and therefore comes without tone or expression so can be misunderstood, or people (not only children) are more likely to be unkind when they don't have to see the other person's reactions.

Observations – Set time limits. Check in. Organise them if they don't organise themselves. Idle hands and open access are a poor combination. This situation also leaves the children open to adults with poor intentions.

Male 15 yrs — He had been a victim of cyberbullying at his last school. It had affected him badly. When asked what he did about it, he said, "Nothing." I asked why, and he replied, "Because nothing could be done. The kid went to another school."

Observations — SOMETHING COULD AND SHOULD HAVE BEEN DONE. Talk to your children. Look for the signs. Give them strategies to avoid cyberbullying, and deal with it early if it starts. Get involved in the proactive ways outlined in the fact sheets (Communication section of these materials). Something can always be done. All schools will have a specific cyberbullying policy and procedure. Action can be taken regardless of the school. There is no need for your child, or you, to feel powerless in these situations. You can help.

Job applicant — Attended an interview at a school. When she left the interview, she tweeted, "I've never met a bigger bunch of losers."

Panel — As part of the interview process, one of the panel members had started following the applicant on her Twitter account. She checked the applicant's Twitter feed and showed the other panel members. She did not get the job.

Observations — This is not an isolated case. Things like this happen all the time. The online world is not private. When information is posted, it is there permanently and for all to see. A good lesson in etiquette and the significance of your digital footprint is necessary.

Group of teenage girls – Created a fictitious profile of a young teenage boy. They targeted one of the girls at their school and encouraged her to think this boy was interested in her. The girl was pressured to send naked photos of herself to this fictitious boy's account. The girls who set up the account proceeded to share and spread the images.

Observations – This example is happening all over the world. It is hateful and nasty. You can protect your child. Use the fact sheets on cyberbullying and sexting so that your child understands the legality of the situation (child exploitation materials) and the vulnerable position in which they place themselves. Empower your children through education and communication to trust their instincts. Believe, not just know, that the Internet is permanent and unforgiving when it comes to deleting images/information.

Teenage girl – Approached me after a presentation, distraught and wanting to delete one of her social networking accounts. She had set up two. One her parents knew about and one they didn't. Even though there was nothing disturbing on the second account, she knew she was breaking her parents' rules. It weighed on her mind. She tried to delete it but couldn't. She panicked. She was upset that she had made a mistake and couldn't fix it. This caused her stress and anxiety. She had not discussed it with her parents.

Observations – Communicate. Make sure the rules in your home are understood, and reinforce any consequences. **Expect your child to make mistakes.** Talk to them about their mistakes, and help them learn from them. None of us is perfect. This girl is unlikely to do this again. She should talk to her parents about it, and she will feel much better.

Young teen girl – Disclosed that she had sent sexy pictures to her boyfriend. She said as soon as she pressed send, she felt sick and wanted the pictures back. She approached her boyfriend the next day and asked him to delete them. She watched him delete them. She said she worries that there is a copy somewhere and that they will reappear sometime in the future.

Observations – Girls are pressured into taking photos and sending them to their current boyfriend. It seems to be that some teens think this is a normal part of dating. Communicate with your girls and boys. Educate them about the legalities, the permanency of the images, and the temporary nature of teen relationships. Teach them to trust their instincts and be comfortable with pleasing themselves first. They should not feel pressured to please their friends at the expense of their own safety and future.

Brett Lee – I sometimes tell the group of students that I have looked around the web and found their images and messages. To the group, I say something like, "I'm going to present a combination of images and messages I have identified as belonging to this group of students."

The students – They are never really forced to face the reality of their digital footprint. It changes their body language, physical indicators, and facial expressions DRAMATICALLY. "Hey, are you allowed to do that?" "That's private." "I own those images." The idea makes them very uncomfortable, even before they are presented.

Brett Lee – "It's on the screen, so it's not private, and the photos you are about to see are mine; you just happen to be in them. This is my copy."

Observations – Communicate and educate. Try this at home. Google your child—or just tell them you are going to. You have every right to see what everyone else can already see. The online world is not private, and most people do not use privacy settings properly inside each program.

A Cautionary Tale for the Adults...

School librarian – Delivering a session on cyber safety to primary school-aged children. "What sites do you visit most online?"

10-yr-old boy – "RSVP"

School librarian – "That's a dating site. Why are you going on an adult dating site?"

10-yr-old boy – "Because I like looking at my teacher's stuff and seeing what she's doing."

Observations – True story! Hysterical. But cautionary. Online privacy is an illusion. AND children know how to work the sites, sometimes better than we do. Get educated. Set your parental controls, and google how to create the appropriate privacy setting on all of your and your children's programs. You can improve your privacy and feel more confident.