

## Safety in a digital world

■ Mom's mission, to help parents protect kids online

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By MAUREEN DOLAN/Staff writer |

COEUR d'ALENE - Hannah Masters recalls walking past her son's bedroom, and hearing what sounded like a party going on.

"It was just him in there, alone with the Xbox Live," Masters said.

Like many gaming systems, Xbox Live allows players to compete against other players from anywhere in the world while connected to the Internet.

"I realized then that he had this whole other world that he was spending time in, where I didn't know what was really going on," said Masters, the mother of two middle school-age boys.

Young gamers are often doing more than wandering through Hogwarts Castle when they're playing Lego Harry Potter or as they jam along with Rock Band 3. They can also chat online while they're playing games, and they can do that with anyone anywhere also.

It's something that happens on many devices children often use, Masters said.

"If it has two batteries and a plug, chances are it can be connected to the Internet," she said.

Masters' concern about her own child's online activities grew when her son received a cell phone call at 10 p.m. one night last summer, and she discovered he had taken his phone to bed with him. He told her he was sleeping with the phone because he didn't want to miss a call.

That didn't sit well with Masters.

Then the Coeur d'Alene mom learned of Tim Woda, a Maryland dad who became an Internet child safety advocate after his own child had a brush with a sexual predator.

"When I heard Tim's story, I saw that there really is a huge information gap and disconnect between parents and children," Masters said. "And I feel like I'm technologically savvy."

Masters said Woda's 14-year-old son asked if he could have a Facebook page, and Woda told the boy he didn't think it was necessary.

Under pressure from his peers at school, the son set up a Facebook page on his own, at a friend's house, without Woda's knowledge. The boy "friended a friend of a friend," Masters said, and unwittingly gave a sexual predator access to all his personal information. The man knew who Woda's son's friends were, where the boy went to school, and where he could be found at any time of the day.

"Facebook is not a diary," Masters said. "It's a billboard."

Woda did not know about his child's Facebook page until he saw an unfamiliar number on a cell phone bill and asked his son about it.

The boy came clean to his dad about his surreptitious social networking activities, and said the call came from someone he met on Facebook, a man who had telephoned and asked the boy to meet him. Woda's son declined the invitation, to which his new Facebook friend replied, "That's OK, I'll just come get you."

The faceless friend turned out to be a child predator arrested on 24 counts of crimes against children, and now in prison.

Woda didn't lack knowledge of online security. He was a vice president for a major e-commerce security company at the time.

Soon after his son's experience, Woda began speaking at schools and churches, giving free educational workshops to alert parents to the perils of the digital world, and help them create a safer place for their kids online.

For Masters, Woda's story was more than a cautionary tale, it was a call to action.

"You may be the only person who doesn't know what's going on with your child," Masters said.

She became an Internet and mobile child safety advocate herself and now gives free workshops developed by Woda.

Masters gave a presentation to parents at Lakes Magnet Middle School in Coeur d'Alene last fall. Response to the workshop was so positive that Masters will be back at Lakes for a repeat performance on March 3 at 6 p.m.

"We were interested because Lakes has been working really hard on anti-bullying efforts," said Lana Hamilton, assistant principal at Lakes. "The parents found it very helpful. It's a tool for them. It encourages parents to be attentive in the use of their electronic devices."

Another workshop is scheduled at Canfield Middle School at 6 p.m. on Feb. 24.

The free presentations are open to the public, and coincide with Idaho Drug Free Youth events at each school.

Tolli Willhite, chair of the Parent Teacher Association at Sorensen Magnet School in Coeur d'Alene, said parents at her school heard about the upcoming workshops from Masters at their December meeting.

"We fully agree that it's good to catch these kids early, particularly at our school because we do have a sixth grade class, unlike other elementary schools," Willhite said.

It's smart to arm children with healthy online habits while they're in the earlier elementary grades, Willhite said, because the kids are still receptive to what parents have to say and are not yet rebelling.

"At this age, you just want to preserve their self esteem as much as you can. They haven't had much of a chance to have it squashed yet. There's plenty of time for that later," Willhite said. "We want them to be aware of each other's feelings, and know how important it is to treat each other with respect and dignity."

Woda then co-founded KidSafe.me, a company offering a package of tools and software that parents can use to filter and track Internet social media and cell phones - instant messaging, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and text messaging.

Masters promises there will be no sales pitch at the workshops, that parents will walk away armed with free information and tools.

She tells parents to "be engaged," and make sure they know their kids' user names and passwords. Masters will also share some of the language of texting, the abbreviations beyond LOL, many with sexual connotations that parents may not be aware of.

"I'm just really passionate about this because I love kids, and I have two of my own," Masters said.