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FBI offers Internet safety help

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On the Internet, kids can be their own worst enemies.

Some of them provide too much personal information to strangers. Some post photos of themselves online. Others arrange to meet, in person, people they met in a chat room.

The potential dangers can give a parent nightmares.

In an effort to put some of those fears to rest, the FBI is offering a free online Internet safety program for students in grades five through eight. Students, school administrators, teachers and parents can check it out at www.fbi-sos.org.

The "SOS" in the name stands for "safe online surfing."

In addition to general information about the FBI, the Web site provides safety tips for parents, an information scavenger hunt for youths and instructions for school officials on how they can register for the program.

So far, 300 schools in 38 states have signed on to teach Internet safety using the FBI-SOS Internet Challenge, said Daryl Hulce, the program's co-creator and administrator. He and John Starr, a representative from FBI headquarters, talked about the program in Omaha on Wednesday night with members of the local FBI Citizens' Academy Alumni Association.

Schools that register to take part then compete against other schools from around the country. Students take an online pre-quiz, learn about Internet safety in the scavenger hunt and then take an online quiz afterward. The improvements in scores between the pre-quiz and the post-quiz demonstrate how much the students are learning, Hulce said.

"Some kids don't know nearly as much as they think they do," he said.

Scores on the post-quiz are tallied, and the students who provide the most accurate and quickest responses earn the highest scores.

The school with the top 20 scorers in a given month's time receives a trophy, usually presented by an FBI agent from an area field office. The five top-scoring students from that school also receive a certificate and a backpack.

Hulce, who works for Nova Southeastern University in Florida, and Jim Lewis, a Miami-based FBI special agent, came up with the program in 2005. Starr said the cyber division of the FBI's national office began to promote it nationwide last year.

No Nebraska middle schools have signed up yet, Hulce said.

By the end of next year, he said, officials plan to tailor offerings on the site to expand the target audience to span from third-graders to 10th-graders.

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