MIDDLE SCHOOL TIPS FOR CYBER SAFETY

(From AWARE Educators, PSB Health Teachers and BHS Peer Leaders)

Middle schoolers tend to view the internet as a captivating playground with boundless opportunities for communication, self-expression, fun and mischief. AWARE educators report that kids also tend to be overconfident and naïve about online dangers, seldom stopping to think about the possible ramifications of their online activity.   Although by law children must be at least 13 to open a Snapchat, Instagram or Facebook account, middle school students are flocking to these sites and downloading these apps. (BHS Peer Leaders believe children should not have social media accounts until they are in high school.)

AWARE educators and health teachers advise parents to set up social media accounts together with their children and continue to have an active role in helping them navigate the tricky terrain of the internet. They have several basic recommendations to help keep younger internet users safe:

* Make a **contract** between you and your child about what is OK to do online. Talk about what is inappropriate and potentially harmful, including risqué photos and hurtful comments.

* Set **time limits** for online use. Keep devices out of the bedroom. Each evening bring devices to a central charging station in the home.

* Address the issue of **online bullying**. Ask children if they have ever been on the receiving end of hurtful comments. If conversations in AWARE class have heightened understanding of how damaging hurtful comments online can be? And if someone is cyberbullying your child, have your child stop interacting with them -- don't talk to them at all. Seek help from a guidance counselor if the problem continues.

* **Monitor** your child's Internet habits. Ask them to show you any social media accounts, like Facebook and Twitter, and have your child show you what sites they frequently visit. (You can check this on your own by reviewing the "history" in your browser, the most recent "cookies" and "bookmarks/favorites.") Beware of sites allowing anonymous posts, such as chatroulette.

* **Know the apps** on your child's phone. Ask him/her to tell you about the applications. Be aware of "Vault Apps" that disguise some social sites as calculators or other tools.

* Instill **online caution**. Urge your child to be wary of sharing information online. If a website asks you a question, don't automatically answer it. Ask yourself, "Why am I being asked this? What do they really want?"

The Federal Trade Commission suggests these tips for socializing safely online:

   * Consider restricting access to your accounts (i.e. Facebook) to a select group of people -- your school friends, your club, your team, your community groups, or your family.
   * Be cautious about posting information that could be used to identify you or locate you offline. In addition to full name, address, and phone number, this could include the name of your school, sports team, clubs, and where you work or hang out.

* Make sure your screen name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your name, your age, or your hometown. Even if you think your screen name makes you anonymous, it doesn't take a genius to combine clues to figure out who you are and where you can be found.

* Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing — and knowing — about you. Many people can see your page, including your parents, your teachers, the police, the college you might want to apply to in a few years, or the job you ultimately might want to apply for.

* Remember that once you post information online, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.

* Consider not posting your photo. It can be altered and broadcast in ways you may not be happy about. If you do post one, ask yourself whether it's one your mom would display in the living room.

* Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you're dealing with. Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. If you feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, tell an adult you trust and report it to the police and the social networking site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.

RESOURCES ON KIDS AND TECHNOLOGY

There are numerous resources for more information on social media statistics, information and safety for teens. Here are two:

Common Sense Media https://www.**commonsensemedia**.org/

Center on Media and Child Health www.**cmch**.tv/

Click here for B-PEN's full list

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www.B-PEN.org

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AWARE is a collaborative educational program by law enforcement officers, educators, students, parents, and community to reduce risky behavior among Brookline youth, from drug and alcohol abuse to cyberbullying and relationship violence. Classroom presentations are designed to help students recognize and resist the pressures that influence them to engage in unhealthy behavior.