

Social media fuel school traumas

Jenifer O'Brien, The London Free Press

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At least one London-area high school student is seeing a psychiatrist to help her cope with suicidal thoughts triggered by sexting. In other high schools across the region, teachers deal weekly with fist fights, bullying and emotional breakdowns fuelled by [Facebook](#), says a London vice-principal.

The impact of social media on young people is beyond complicated -- its misuse can be scary, said Rick Townend, vice- principal of Mother Teresa secondary school.

That's why the school is host to a free public seminar Wednesday to educate parents on the dangerous potential of social media and the consequences some behaviour can have on today's teens.

"We want to talk to parents about the dangers involved with [Facebook](#) use and also educate them," said Townend, adding the media-violence conference will include a presentation from University of Western Ontario psychologist Peter Jaffe and an interactive play.

"When I was growing up, media violence meant a gunfight on television. Now it's so much more than that," he said. "The smart phone has changed everything. Now we have cyber-bullying, and kids with smart phones have the ability to upload and update their status instantly -- even in the span of a class -- so (a conflict) that starts at the beginning of a period could have a [Facebook](#) discussion page going before that period is over."

Townend said school staff are having a hard time managing the increasing number of Facebook or text-message-related fights at school.

"We are trying to deal with it but we are up against obstacles," he said. School staff are compelled, under the province's Safe Schools Act, to deal with many situations that start online.

"When harassment carries over into the school, we have to get involved," he said. "When kids continue to perpetuate that harassment to that student at school, that's a problem."

One of the worst situations he has seen occurred after a girl sent intimate photos of herself to a boyfriend -- a trend commonly known as "sexting" -- who then forwarded the photos to buddies after the couple broke up.

Feeling humiliated and mortified, the girl spiraled into a deep depression and eventually sought help for her suicidal thoughts, Townend said.

The regular in-school conflicts have become so disruptive Townend said he wants teachers to incorporate a lesson about the "civil use of technology" into their class.

"Teenagers today in 2011 are very savvy and very connected and very worldly, but at the same time not fully aware of the harm they can do to someone or the lasting emotional pain it can have," he said.

The conference is open to the public.

IF YOU GO:

What: Tuned Out: Dangers of Media Violence and Social Networking

When: Wednesday, 7 to 9 p.m.

Where: Mother Teresa Catholic secondary school, 1065 Sunningdale Rd E.