Mahwah parents learn about bullying in the technological age

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MAHWAH - Bullying has evolved.

These days, in the blink of an eye, teens can spreading hurtful rumors through social networking sites and berate one another in online chat rooms.

To help parents understand the mean world of cyberbullying, the Mahwah Municipal Alliance arranged to have Dr. Sameer Hinduja, a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, to make a presentation on the subject at the Sheraton Crossroads on Thursday, Jan. 13.

In the wake of such high-profile suicides as that of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi, who jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate allegedly streamed footage of an intimate encounter with another man, and Phoebe Prince of Massachusetts, who was said to have faced daily harassment in text messages and on Facebook, parents and officials at all levels of government have mobilized to prevent others.

"I feel like we all have our stories," said Hinduja, later recalling his own experience with bullying during adolescence to a room of attentive parents. In his case, jealousy over a friendship with a popular girl culminated in an afterschool altercation.

Parents, he said, often gloss over some childhood memories, but they vividly remember incidents involving bullying.

"It weighs on you," he said.

Teens know how to navigate the web, he said in his two-hour presentation, but for parents who are "digital immigrants," learning the ins and outs of social networking sites like Facebook and joining the site for monitoring purposes can be helpful.

"Peer perceptions dictate self-worth, unfortunately," he said. "Overall you want people to like you."

Teens, of course, have embraced technology, and by 2009, 93 percent of teens were browsing the web, said Hinduja; three out of four teens have online profiles and 38 percent share content.

Fortunately, he said, the activities of anonymous bullies can be traced by a virtual "evidentiary trail."
Hinduja said parents can take the plunge and join social networking sites as silent "friends" of their children and even some of their children's friends.

But be aware of the "parent" friendly Facebook pages, which are second to your child's "real" Facebook page, he advised.

Hinduja urged parents to understand that the Internet is not just a part of their children's lives, it is their lives.

"I want to encourage you to bring it up," he said. "Constantly talk about it."

He added that it is essential for parents to keep the lines of communication open, and to talk during dinner and car rides to soccer practices.

Parents, he said, are responsible for their own patterns of behavior, and know when to admit fault if their children witness them being mean to other people. Kids are like sponges, he said.

Meanwhile, he suggested they keep computers in a family area and install web-tracking software to help them monitor their children's behavior online.

Hinduja said he was happy to see such a large turnout of parents, as usually his seminars attract low numbers.

"It takes a village," he said. "I think you guys get that."