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ADVERTISING

Teaching Teenagers About Harassment

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

This month, three teenage girls, students at Greensburg Salem High School in Greensburg, Pa., were charged with disseminating child pornography.

They had sent nude pictures of themselves by cellphone to their teenage boyfriends, who were charged with possessing child pornography.

The legal consequences in this case may have been unique, but the behavior is not. About 20 percent of teenagers have posted or sent nude cellphone pictures of themselves, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonprofit group.

Sending nude pictures, whether it is done under pressure or not, is part of a pattern of teenage behavior that the Family Violence Prevention Fund, a nonprofit domestic violence awareness group based in San Francisco, has labeled digital dating violence. The digital violence can include sending nonstop text messages or posting cruel comments on a boyfriend's or girlfriend's Facebook or MySpace page. The behaviors can be a warning sign that a teenager may become a perpetrator or a victim of domestic violence, according to the group.

It has gotten to be such a problem — and one that parents are largely unaware of, according to the organization — that it is the focus of a campaign from the Advertising Council, which highlights social issues in public service campaigns.

“This is another generation of domestic violence,” said Peggy Conlon, the chief executive of the Ad Council, which worked with the Family Violence Prevention Fund on the campaign. While the fund has created programs for older teenagers who are experiencing abuse, this campaign focuses on middle-school students, trying to get them to define and stop harassment in a relationship.

“Controlling behavior, unwarranted behavior, behavior where you say ‘no more’ and then there’s a continuation of that behavior, can easily turn into abuse,” said Esta Soler, the president of the fund, which is supported by government agencies like the Justice Department’s Office on Violence Against Women, and corporations like Verizon.

Schools and parents have become somewhat aware of electronic bullying because of widely publicized cases like that of Megan Meier, the Missouri teenager who committed suicide after being taunted on MySpace. But Ms. Soler said abuse within teenage romantic relationships, particularly through digital mediums, was “a huge and basically unaddressed problem in this country.”

Almost one in 10 high school students has been physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend,

according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research. And one-quarter of teenagers in relationships say they have been called names or harassed by their partner through cellphones and text messages, according to a study commissioned by the clothing company Liz Claiborne, which sponsors antiviolence programs.

About 39 percent of teenagers have sent sexual e-mail messages or instant messages, according to a 2008 study from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com.

“There was this whole world going on that parents didn’t know about that was emerging through how kids used these digital tools,” said Nick Law, the chief creative officer, North America, of the digital advertising agency R/GA, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, which designed the Ad Council campaign.

As the Family Violence Prevention Fund and R/GA researched the issue by setting up blogs and talking to teenagers, they realized the teenagers frequently received digital threats or upsetting requests from people they were dating. But the teenagers were not talking about it, did not know how to handle it and did not know what was appropriate and what was not.

“It was abuse that there was no protocol around,” Mr. Law said. The parents were not aware of the interactions, and the teenagers did not know how to prevent it, he said.

The campaign and its Web site, ThatsNotCool.com, encourage teenagers to set their own boundaries. It is intended to appeal to all teenagers, not just those with serious problems.

“The kids don’t want to be told what’s right and what’s wrong,” Mr. Law said.

On the site, teenagers can send one of 35 “callout cards” — brightly colored messages they can send by e-mail, post to their Facebook or MySpace accounts or download — that are meant to tell someone they have crossed a line.

The messages are sharp. For example: “Congrats! With that last text, you’ve achieved stalker status.”

The site offers an area where teenagers can seek advice, like how to stop a boyfriend from nonstop text-messaging. For more direct advice, the site tells teenagers to call or conduct a live chat with trained volunteers.

R/GA also asked people with existing YouTube followings to create videos for the project. Brandon Hardesty, who does movie re-enactments under the name ArtieTSMITW on YouTube, did scenes about how parents or guidance counselors might react to finding nude pictures on a cellphone.

The campaign is digitally focused, reflecting the way teenagers communicate. Even the posters that will appear in schools, which display some of the “callout card” messages, ask viewers to snap a photo with their cellphone and text-message it to someone.

Google is providing all of the advertising space, like banner ads and search inventory, for the first five weeks of the campaign. Because ThatsNotCool.com is a new site with no existing advertising, Google will be able to measure things like “how many people are driven to the campaign as you add another medium,” said Erin Clift, Google’s director of agency relations for North America. Google wanted the five-week exclusive period

to establish a baseline measurement and said it would have results once other mediums were added.

The television, radio and outdoor advertising begin on Feb. 9. The television spot shows a boyfriend dressed in a cellphone costume constantly interrupting his girlfriend's day with text messages.

All of the communications are aimed at teenagers, not parents. Ms. Soler said the fund was working on a campaign to alert parents to problems, but for now, she wanted to get teenagers discussing them.

"We want to give them the tools to say 'You can have a healthy relationship, and here's the road map,'" Ms. Soler said.

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