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Always think before you hit the send button

Ledyard

Question for every parent: Do you know — truly know — what's on your child's phone?

Do you want to?

Do you believe it is your responsibility?

Good questions, these.

And perhaps why it wasn't merely high school kids that should have been listening to Tom Pincince on Wednesday morning. It was quieter than the Christian Science Reading Room inside the auditorium at Ledyard High, 400 kids hanging on Pincince's every syllable. Know why? Because there's nothing more prevalent in the lives of kids today than social media and all its tentacles.

Pincince, the Assistant Athletic Director for Communications and Media Services at Central Connecticut, travels to high school across the state to inform, enlighten and educate about the vagaries of social media, specifically how kids can better navigate and use it.

"I'm not here to say don't use social media. I'm here to help you make better decisions," Pincince was saying, clearly having mastered the art of being informative but not preachy. "This is personal to me. I'm a dad. I am aware. The best way for me to be a better dad is to learn as much as I can about this stuff."

Pincince has seen it all. Ill-advised posts on Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter and various other outlets, leading to suicide attempts, job denials, suspensions and expulsions, all because of the failure to think before hitting "send."

Pincince's earnestness, combined with his knowledge of issues that affect kids not merely every day — but every minute — fortified his message. Example: He was quite direct about the pastime among many high school kids today. Nudes. They send photos to each other in various stages of undress. It's a competition, as much for the girls as the boys. And if you are thinking, "not my daughter!" ... ask yourself how do you really know?

"The photos get traded around like

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baseball cards," Pincince said. "Aside from it being illegal to have photos of people of a certain age, they don't go away. Once you hit send you lose complete control of that picture."

Pincince referenced a story in the Washington Post, detailing the travails of a 13-year-old girl whose nudes were shared with a 13-year boy, whose sinister motives led to the girl's suicide attempts. He also mentioned that nudes on "Snapchat" don't go away either, despite Snapchat's principal concept that messages and images are only available for a short time before disappearing.

"They don't go away," he said.

"When you sign up for Snapchat you agree that Snapchat can keep the stuff you sent, not to mention if someone happened to take a screen shot of it."

Remember the recent cause celebre over the book "1984" in Stonington schools? If only it was Big Brother watching us now. It's everybody.

"We live in a time when we always have to be 'on,'" Pincince said.

"Everywhere you go, someone has a camera. It's not fair. The people who take a photo of the game-winning shot are the same ones who will take a photo of the shot you miss at the buzzer — and then heckle you for it."

Hence, Pincince used the word "think" as an acronym for the best way to post on social media. If the post isn't "true, helpful, inspiring, necessary, kind" don't post it. He said never to post when emotional, angry, stressed or upset.

"You will make a bad decision," he said.

And haven't we all? Full disclosure: I've sent some of the most ill-advised email missives in the history of the world.

Maybe that's why Pincince's game plan of "take this play off" truly resonated with the kids. It's another way of saying this. When you are angry, put the phone down. Take this play off. Don't be impulsive. Many times, things are not what they appear.

Social media preys on our impatience. Our impulsiveness. Our insecurities. Our need for certainty. And, yes, on our fears. Fear, remember, is an acronym for "false evidence appearing real." As Pincince reiterated Wednesday:

"I was at Glastonbury High and a girl was telling me about how she saw her best friend and boyfriend talking in the corner of the hallway looking kind of cozy," he said. "The girl got enraged and fired off something on social media. The boyfriend and best friend saw the post and asked the girl why she was so mad. It turned out they were planning her surprise birthday party, which never ended up happening."

Quite the educational experience here at Ledyard High. Again, I ask parents: Do you really know what's on your child's phone?

This is the opinion of Day sports columnist Mike DiMauro.