

**Testimony before the House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security  
September 30, 2009  
Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz**

Thank you, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gohmert, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, for allowing me to testify today beside my friend and fellow committee colleague, Representative Linda Sanchez, and my friend and lead Republican co-sponsor, Representative John Culberson. It is always an honor to appear before this Committee, and I am pleased that we continue to make protecting children online a high priority.

As proud as I am to represent South Florida in the House of Representatives, the job closest to my heart is being a mother to my ten-year-old twins and six-year-old daughter. As one of only a handful of mothers with young children in Congress, I can assure you that I have no higher priority than keeping our children safe from harm. I approach today's topic as a web-savvy mom with web-savvy kids. In fact, as of yesterday, my six-year-old daughter has an email address, which she uses on her iPod Touch.

Parents and teachers already know that our children are growing up in a completely different world than we did. The Internet is a wonderful tool, but it has also become an pathway for risky behavior. The same Internet that helps our children create, study, and explore the world also enables minors to post nude photos online or text them to friends. The same Internet that allows children to organize clubs and volunteer for after-school activities also provides a way for children to harass their fellow students relentlessly, anonymously, publicly, and after the school day has long ended.

As legislators, we have to get real. We must accept that our kids spend more time online than in front of the television.<sup>1</sup> We have to own up to the fact that 89 percent of teenagers have profiles on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.<sup>2</sup> We must understand that nearly four in ten kids have used the Internet to make fun of, or post lies about, their fellow students.<sup>3</sup> We must understand we live in an era when four out of five teenagers have cell phones -- most of which

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Mindlin, *Preferring the Web Over Watching TV*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 25, 2008, at C3 (reporting a survey that found that 83 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 14 spend more than an hour on the Internet each day, while only 68 percent of the same group spent that much time in front of the television.)

<sup>2</sup> Hearing Testimony of Judi Westberg Warren, *Web Wise Kids*, House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, September 30, 2009, at 2.

<sup>3</sup> Common Sense Media, *Is Social Networking Changing Childhood? A National Poll*, available at <http://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/Social%20Networking%20Poll%20Summary%20Results.pdf>, at 6. The poll, conducted between May 28, 2009, and June 5, 2009, showed that 37 percent of respondents between the ages of 13 and 18 admitted to making fun of other students online and another 16 percent admitted to posting lies about other people.

have cameras.<sup>4</sup> And we must know that more than one in five teenagers admit to “sexting” nude photos of themselves to peers.<sup>5</sup>

These behaviors, often done on impulse or in boredom, have devastating, real-life consequences. This May, I had the honor of meeting Cynthia Logan, a young mother from Ohio. She told me her story, and it broke my heart. Her daughter, Jesse, was only 18 years old when she sent nude photos of herself to her boyfriend. After the young couple broke up, the ex-boyfriend sent them to other high school girls. They called Jesse names I can’t repeat in this hearing. They passed around her pictures as casually as they would notes in a classroom. They made Jesse’s life a living hell. What began as a private communication turned into a *public humiliation*. Jesse became miserable and depressed. She eventually took her own life.

Sadly, Jesse’s case is not unique. Megan Meier, the young teen from Missouri who is the namesake of Congresswoman Sanchez’ legislation, also committed suicide after being bullied online. It is not surprising that researchers at the Yale School of Medicine have found significant links between bullying and suicide.<sup>6</sup>

There are other dire consequences to these behaviors. An 18-year-old boy in my own home state of Florida was convicted on child pornography charges for “sexted” photos. He must now register as a sex offender for the rest of his life.<sup>7</sup>

So, what do we do about it? There is no “one answer” – there is no “silver bullet.” But we can either continue to shut our eyes to the reality, or we can tackle this problem head-on. I believe we must usher in a new era of Internet safety education and cyber-crime awareness. Instead of preventing our children from using the Internet, or criminalizing speech online that would be permissible on the playground, we must instead teach children how to be good cyber-citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> See Westberg Warren testimony, *supra*, at 2. See also Nielsen Poll: “Mobile Kids Insights: Profiling the Youngest Mobile Audience,” available at [http://en-us.nielsen.com/etc/medialib/nielsen\\_dotcom/en\\_us/documents/pdf/fact\\_sheets.Par.78796.File.dat/Nielsen%20Mobile%20Kids%20Fact%20Sheet\\_12-08.pdf](http://en-us.nielsen.com/etc/medialib/nielsen_dotcom/en_us/documents/pdf/fact_sheets.Par.78796.File.dat/Nielsen%20Mobile%20Kids%20Fact%20Sheet_12-08.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> A Chicago based trend analyst firm called Teenage Research Unlimited recently surveyed 1200 students about “sexting.” One out of every five students told researchers they had used their cell phones to send sexy or nude photos of themselves. Keagan Harsha (2009-01-03). “Is Your Child “Sexting”?”. WCAX-TV. [http://www.wcax.com/Global/story.asp?S=9612361&nav=menu183\\_2](http://www.wcax.com/Global/story.asp?S=9612361&nav=menu183_2) (retrieved January 14, 2009). Additionally, in the Common Sense Media poll, *supra* note 3 at 6, 13 percent of respondents between the ages of 13 and 18 admitted sending or posting naked or semi-naked photos of themselves or others online. This poll also shows that parents are out of touch with this behavior, as only 2 percent of parents polled believe their children were posting or sending such photos. *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Berin Szoka & Adam Thierer, *Cyberbullying Legislation: Why Education is Preferable to Regulation*, Progress on Point, Volume 16, Issue 12 (June 2009), at 2 (citing *Bullying and Being Bullied Linked to Suicide in Children, Review of Studies Suggests*, ScienceDaily, July 19, 2008, available at [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080717170428.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080717170428.htm)).

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Feyerick and Sheila Steffen, ‘Sexting’ Lands Teen on Sex Offender List, CNN American Morning, April 8, 2009, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/04/07/sexting.busts/index.html>.

Unfortunately, most parents and most teachers don't feel comfortable teaching kids how to be safe online.<sup>8</sup> This means most children receive no training in the safe, smart, and responsible use of the Internet. I myself have held three Internet safety town halls in my District, but as individuals and parents, we can't do this alone. We need a consistent, national approach.

Last week, with Congressman Culberson, I was proud to introduce H.R. 3630, the Adolescent Web Awareness Requires Education Act, or the AWARE Act. Our bill will establish a competitive grant program so that non-profit Internet safety organizations can work together with schools and communities to educate students, teachers and parents about these online dangers. Our bill authorizes up to \$125 million over five years to establish age-appropriate, research-based programs that will encourage the safe, smart, and responsible use of the Internet and teach cyber-crime awareness and digital literacy in the new media to our children.

Education is important because it helps teach both parents and children how to act in all kinds of real-life situations. Education is vital because it can reinforce new norms between students. Education gives children lessons, teaches skills, and builds strength that can last a lifetime. We can teach children to treat their fellow students the same way online that they would in person. We can teach them not to bully or harass their peers, and how to report dangerous or threatening activity when they see it. We can teach them not to post inappropriate material about themselves or others. We can teach them about privacy settings and about the risks of talking to strangers or posting personal information online. We can teach them that what they put online, stays online. We can teach them that the minute they hit send, they not only lose control over where their photos go next, they can also lose control of their future.

We can teach children how to be safe on the Web.

Jesse Logan's death was a tragedy, but it is also a powerful reminder about the lives we can save. Knowledge is power – and, with the AWARE Act, it is my hope that we make knowledge our children's first line of defense.

Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> See Schools Need Training to Build a Safe Net, *available at* <http://www.edtechpolicy.org/NCSA/Archived/21stCenturyConnectinos.pdf>. According to the survey, 75 percent of teachers don't feel comfortable discussing cyber-bullying and less than 32 percent are comfortable giving guidance on how to be safe in an online environment, including social networking and online predators.