

Press Release

**STATE HOUSE PRESS CONFERENCE TO HIGHLIGHT FREE
PROGRAM TO PROTECT CHILDREN ON THE INTERNET**

Internet Safety Program Will Help Protect Children from Online Victimization

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Augusta, ME. At a press conference today, Attorney General Rowe, Education Commissioner Sue Gendron and Public Safety Commissioner Michael Cantara announced that a new Internet Child Safety Program is now available to all Maine teachers, students and parents for *free*.

These state agencies have partnered with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) to bring NetSmartz® to Maine to help protect children from online victimization. The goal of the NetSmartz Workshop is to extend the safety awareness of children to prevent victimization and increase self-confidence whenever they go online.

While the Internet provides children with an opportunity to learn about the world, it has also become a place where sexual predators prey on children. Approximately 1 in 5 kids online is sexually solicited but that less than 10 percent of sexual solicitations are reported to authorities. Reports to the Maine Computer Crimes Task Force of Internet child exploitation have increased 173% over the last two years.

Lt. Col. John Dyer, Deputy Chief, Maine State Police, said, "Any program that affords us the opportunity to reduce child exploitation and victimization is welcomed. The Department of Public Safety and our law enforcement partners throughout the State are pleased to be working in partnership to support the NetSmartz program."

"We teach our children not to speak to strangers, but until now, we have not had the right tools to teach our children personal safety on the Internet." said Attorney General Steve Rowe. "The unwanted sexual solicitations our children receive online have a lasting impact. Our children are frightened and distressed about these interactions. The best way to keep our children safe is to teach them how to protect themselves online."

The NetSmartz Workshop is an interactive Internet Safety resource that provides age-appropriate materials for grades K-12. The Workshop uses animation to teach younger kids rules for online safety and also offers real-life stories for teens. Parents, educators, and law enforcement officers can visit specialized areas on NetSmartz.org for Internet safety pledges, statistics, and ideas on how to use NetSmartz materials to open lines of communication about potential dangers on the Internet. NetSmartz is a program of the NCMEC and Boys & Girls Clubs of America and is available for free on www.NetSmartz.org.

“We believe the Internet is a valuable resource for today’s youth,” says Rick Minicucci, President of NetSmartz. “We also understand the need to educate children to make responsible decisions online. Therefore, NetSmartz uses the latest technology to educate, entertain, and empower even the most tech-savvy kids.”

Five middle schools in Maine piloted the NetSmartz Internet Safety Program last year. Diane MacGregor, Maranacook Technology Integration Specialist, and Jan Kolenda, Maranacook District Technology Coordinator, agree that the Netsmartz website offers some of the best information and materials to support online safety for educators, parents, and most importantly students. Diane MacGregor said, “The students at Maranacook Community Middle School found the vignettes to be realistic and informative. As an educator and a parent, I feel this website offers the support adults need to become better educated on internet safety.”

Education Commissioner Sue Gendron announced that all Superintendents of Schools, School Principals, and Technology Coordinators learned today that NetSmartz will be available for use in their schools free of charge. Gendron said, “We’re excited to offer educators and parents an effective tool to use in the classroom and at home to help children be safer online. NetSmartz offers something for children of all ages and the program can be easily incorporated into any part of the curriculum.”

Clicky, NetSmartz spokesrobot, was on hand to teach some elementary aged children how to “Use their NetSmartz”. UYN is the NetSmartz chat abbreviation. It stands for “Use Your NetSmartz” and is an **EASY** way to remember all the rules of Internet safety.

1. I will tell an adult I trust if anything makes me feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.
2. I will ask my parents or guardian before sharing my personal information.
3. I won’t meet in person with anyone I have first “met” online.

Kids can visit www.NetSmartzKids.org with their parents and play games, complete activities, and listen to music. This is a kid friendly site and doesn’t link to any outside sources.