As I've mentioned before, school safety is our number one priority, and that mission includes our students' physical, emotional, and online safety.

Last week, we had the opportunity to co-host two sessions of Parents Against Predators with our friends from the Panama City Beach Police Department. PCBPD Chief Talamantez has a wealth of knowledge about keeping children safe online and some horrifying stories about local child predator cases he has worked on that involve the internet.

I am so pleased that both sessions were well attended, with more than 600 families taking the time to learn throughout the week. With a record turnout like that, I can guarantee we will continue this partnership and share these sessions with our community as often as the Chief's busy schedule allows.

I'd also like to thank the Central Panhandle Association of Realtors for sponsoring dinner for all attendees on both nights. We definitely could not have managed these events without their generous support and assistance.

At both sessions, Chief Talamantez gave parents some concrete tips for improving the online safety of their children, including:
- Check your child's devices daily
- Look at the photos, videos and text messages they send and receive
- Click on the apps to make sure they are what they appear to be
- Disable "chat" features on games (many predators lurk in chat rooms on games that appeal to children)
- Set up parental controls to limit screen time and access
- Prevent children from having devices in their rooms overnight
- Consider a subscription to a service like Bark which helps parents monitor online activity (more information at https://www.childhood2movie.com/?utm_source=organic%20facebook&utm_medium=newsfeed&utm_campaign=docu&fbclid=IwAR0E86pjDM5cqUTR4gW5GWZRz2o13b1Wcwehg6gVXvbfTGWY0fKMEKTfONM)

There's also a helpful "parent handbook" that you can download from https://mcusercontent.com/a594c6f8d80f1aaa768fb50c1/files/537636f3-1a7b-417d-ab30-9ebe555435ad/Handbook_Raising_Kids_Digital_Age_Childhood2.0_1_.pdf

Additionally, the PCBPD spoke specifically last week about the new addition of artificial intelligence to Snapchat, a very popular app with teens and pre-teens. According to PCBPD, "The Snapchat AI chat tool, promoted as a 'friend' to users, has been criticized for engaging in inappropriate conversations about sensitive topics like alcohol and sex with young users. This can have serious consequences for their safety and well-being."

To help parents and caregivers mitigate these risks, PCBPD notes that Snapchat has introduced the Family Center. By creating a Snapchat account for yourself and following the steps below, you can access these tools and monitor your teen's online activities:
- First, create a Snapchat account if you still need to create one.
- Next, find Family Center in the app.
- Next, add your teen as a "Friend" and wait for them to accept your request.
- Then, send your teen an invitation to join Family Center and have them accept it.

Talamantez notes, "Remember that Snapchat is designed for users aged 13 and above, and we recommend delaying social media use for children until they're at least that old."

And one last reminder … we want to continue encouraging ALL parents to diligently check all children's backpacks, cars, bedrooms and electronic devices for inappropriate content and items. We have just a couple of weeks left this school year, and we'd like to finish those days safely. But we need your help to do that!

Thank you, as always, for your continued partnership with us. We are grateful for the fantastic resources we have in our community, and leaders like Sheriff Ford and Chief Talamantez who care passionately about the safety of our children.

Stay safe, and God Bless!