

Cyber-safety worth \$10,000

Avondale teacher wins national award for class

By Julie Edgar
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Most children know to never get in a car with a stranger.

But chatting with one online is another thing.

The fundamental rules of safety haven't changed, but the medium demands a different kind of vigilance by children and their parents. And that's what Laura Amatulli is teaching her sixth-graders at Avondale Meadows Upper Elementary in Rochester Hills.

Among her mantras: Don't post your photos online and don't give out personal information under any circumstances, even if the hook -- a free Xbox, for example -- seems harmless. "We're bombarded with media, and you have to know how to look through it carefully. It's become more and more of a safety issue," said Amatulli.

For teaching safety basics, including those promoted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Amatulli, 37, won a \$10,000 makeover of her classroom this summer.

She has already told the designer to build a studio so students can record spots about everything from stormy weather to invasive species in area lakes to online safety tips, of course.

Amatulli, a Michigan National Guard veteran and mother of four from Auburn Hills, is one of five teachers nationwide to win a grand prize in a contest sponsored by the center and Honeywell International.

She submitted an essay on how she incorporated the center's four Got 2B Safe! rules in her classroom. They are checking with a parent or guardian before accepting gifts or rides; telling a trusted adult if someone makes a child feel scared or uncomfortable; staying with a friend in public, and saying "no" to any unwelcome or confusing touch.

Two other southeast Michigan teachers, Christie Warchol, a fifth-grade teacher at Cromie Elementary in Warren, and Kathy Hopper, a third-grade teacher at Spring Mills Elementary in Highland, each won first-place awards of \$500 for school supplies.

"It used to be that missing and abducted children were taken by their parents. I've learned it's wayward teens or runaways lured away by the Internet," said Amatulli.

"There's a lot of freaks out there," said Selena Sanchez, 11, of Auburn Hills, a student in Amatulli's class. "Just giving your e-mail to people could be dangerous."

Classmate Anush Rajam, 12, of Rochester Hills said he doesn't stay online much.

"If it's nice out, I'd rather play outside," he said. "Me and my friends don't really chat with other people online. When somebody wants to go on the Internet, we call him lazy. It always works."

Auburn Hills teacher wins Web safety award:

Classroom to get podcast station

By Katharine V. Smith
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Next school year, sixth-grade students in Laura Amatulli's class are shoo-ins to become expert broadcasters and podcasters, thanks to a mini news station and recording studio to be created this summer.

It's part of a classroom makeover -- valued at \$10,000 -- won by the Avondale Meadows Upper Elementary science and language arts teacher. The 37-year-old from Auburn Hills was named one of five national grand-prize winners by the Got 2B Safe program.

Sponsored by Honeywell industries and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the program recognizes teachers who, through classroom lessons, help keep children safer from abduction and sexual exploitation.

Amatulli is particularly concerned about Internet safety, and has developed ways to teach her students Internet smarts. She emphasizes the four steps of Got 2B Safe: Ask a parent before accepting gifts, rides or invitations from anyone; never go anywhere alone; say no to unwelcome touches or actions, and tell a trusted adult if anything makes you scared, uncomfortable or confused.

QUESTION: How do you head off Internet problems?

ANSWER: Front-loading: We learn about safety first. I tell them, if something looks strange or scary, or makes them uncomfortable in any way, tell a trusted adult. I've been shocked at what will pop up when my students are on the Internet, even with firewalls. It doesn't matter what you do; kids' personal safety is in danger. Even in schools, even with kids as old as sixth-graders, things can happen.

Q: Why do kids make themselves vulnerable online?

A: They're intrigued by it, by their peer groups. They have an obsession with MySpace, and want to post pictures of themselves. But it's not a safe way to meet people. This is happening in part because kids are getting less and less recess, not a lot of downtime. They want time with their peers. Lots of them are from two-parents-working families, and they're told to lock themselves in the house when they get home from school. But even playing more sports, staying more active in peer groups, they'll get online, no matter what. And they need to know what is and isn't safe.

Q: How have you added Net smarts to your curriculum?

A: I designed a series of real-life scenarios to teach kids what to do if similar things happen to them. For example, many of my students get a message saying they won a brand-new laptop or Game Boy or cell phone, and it asks them to fill out their name, age, and address and send it back. A lot of kids say they get viruses sent that way. In my class, we were learning about heredity, cloning and mutations, and on the Internet some students saw some strange images -- distorted images of a cross between a monkey and a parrot.

They weren't true, but the students thought they were. Children this age are very trusting. If it's published, they think, it's got to be real. But I teach them to question what they see.

I wrote up the situations and gave them to three students, who applied the four Got 2B Safe steps. They're taping them as a PSA (public service announcement) next week. They'll be posted on the school's Web site during the summer.

Q: So this summer, you're going to kick back, relax and just enjoy your big win?

A: I'll be at Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala., in June. It's Honeywell's international science outreach, with teachers from 46 countries sharing best practices of teaching science and math. It's a great way to bring new technology into the classroom, and keep studies current, relevant and exciting for kids.

Q: Do you think your efforts inspire students in future careers?

A: Just the other day, I spoke to the lead in the Avondale High School musical, a senior. She had done a terrific job singing, dancing. I said, 'Of course you're going to Broadway, right?' She said, no, she wanted to be a zoologist ever since she took my class in fifth grade. I was thrilled! Even now, graduating students are asking me about science career opportunities -- one girl is interested in remote sensing -- and I try to connect them. I love giving them a foundation to learn and love science and technology.

For more information on Internet safety, Amatulli recommends www.netsmartz411.org.