

Unintentionally victimizing themselves ? teens share inappropriate photos online

The Nottawasaga OPP has noticed a trend with youth and online photos that are sent or posted. We are hearing more and more stories about photos 'going viral' on the Internet, and peers re-distributing sexually-explicit images and videos as a form of bullying or harassment. Young people - often girls - can become fearful and anxious about what is expected of them by other young people, and self-peer exploitation often becomes the 'elephant in the room'.

Our biggest concern is that teens are unintentionally victimizing themselves by sending inappropriate images to others. They seem unaware of the consequences when the images may 'go viral'. (Example: transferred from one device user to another in rapid succession or to broader audiences than originally intended without the original context or consent) across the Internet and other social media sites. Police are seeing many teens who can't cope with the shame and embarrassment of what they have done. Many become depressed, anxious and sometimes suicidal.

The OPP has been working diligently with others to create public education and awareness opportunities in our communities. The Nottawasaga OPP high-school officers work with the schools to provide Internet education sessions, and become involved with complaints that are made regarding inappropriate images online. Further, the Community Service Officer of the Nottawasaga OPP has presented to several elementary schools within our community. Knowledge is power, and by empowering the youth with the information and decision making tools they need when faced with online issues, we are providing the best defence to becoming an online victim.

Police have been promoting a web-based resource for youth called Need Help Now (www.NeedHelpNow.ca). This online resource is designed to help Canadian youth - especially in this niche age demographic -- manage the negative consequences that can occur when sexual images are created and distributed online and reduce further harm. NeedHelpNow.ca provides teens with practical steps to regain control over the situation, helpful information on how they can seek support from a safe adult, and strategies for managing harassment that may occur both online and offline (such as bullying).