

# Best News Feature Story

Second place, Alabama Press Association (2009)

## What's going on?

■ **Psychologist, counselor weigh in on middle school students' sexual behavior**

By Thomas Boni

Editor

bulletin@gulfcoastnewspapers.com

Editor's Note: The Bulletin does not publish the names of children involved with sex crimes or other sexual behavior.

Daphne police a week ago reported two investigations involving the cell phone exchange of nude photos between Daphne Middle School students. Since then, the issue has received widespread attention. The Associated

Press and the Web-based Drudge Retort — an alternative to the Drudge Report — are two behemoths that have reported on the issue, along with several blogs and local media outlets like the Bulletin.

Three DMS sixth-graders and a seventh-grader — two boys, two girls — have been suspended for five days in connection with the photo trade and cell phone use, according to Baldwin County schools spokesperson Terry Wilhite.

“Police and school officials continue to investigate this incident,” he said. “From our perspective, at this point it appears that this ... is limited to four students.”

Teenagers using multimedia messaging to exchange nude photos of themselves is nothing new — a group of 13- and 14-year-old boys and girls at Farmington Junior High School in Utah traded headless nude self-portraits on cell phones in January, spurring the state's attorney general to determine how to handle such

cases according to Fox News — but until now, it had never been reported in the Jubilee City, police said.

It's also a first for Baldwin County public schools, Wilhite said.

“It appears to be a first (nude photo exchange), however, it is not the first disruption that we've had by cell phones, and this is the very reason that administrators support a cell phone ban,” Wilhite said.

SEE INNOCENCE, PAGE 2A

Judges said:

“Heavy story — fitting headline. Questions don't always work as headlines. This one does.”

# Best News Feature Story

(continued)

## INNOCENCE

Continued from Page 1A

The Baldwin County Board of Education in August 2006 enacted such a rule, prohibiting students' use of portable communication devices.

"Cell phones have been used to cheat on tests, they have been used to interrupt the educational days," Wilhite said. "The camera function of the phone is as much of a disruption as the ability to receive or make calls."

DMS students' use of the phones to transmit what police called child pornography is "disappointing but, no, it is not surprising," Wilhite said. "If you've got tech-savvy students you will have students making bad decisions about technology and we've seen that before."

Still, the question remains: What's a child's motivation for such behavior?

Dr. Sonya Rogers, a certified counselor, said she believes the prevalence of the Internet, coupled with the rise of two-income homes, may play a role.

"There's more technology and more parents working, so a lot of students are even more home alone than they used to be," she said.

The Internet, filled with adult Web sites that lack password protection, and unsolicited e-mails with mature content, are two ways that children can learn about sexual exploration.

Whatever the origin, teachers see the effects of lost innocence every day, Rogers said.

"I would bet that, say, half the students we teach in the middle school level are still very innocent and there to learn, but then you have the other half who seem to know what high school students used to know when was in school.

"They're more worldly than they used to be, that's for sure."

The classroom environment — due to students' attitudes — seems to have changed over the years, Rogers said, adding that many students are still there to learn, but some see school as a social opportunity.

"I can remember years ago

" I would bet that, say, half the students we teach in the middle school level are still very innocent and there to learn, but then you have the other half who seem to know what high school students used to know when I was in school. They're more worldly than they used to be, that's for sure. "

when you could walk in a classroom and it would be very quiet; you could teach a lesson and do assessments and feel good about what they learned, where today at the middle school level, you spend a lot of time just saying, 'Sit down, be quiet,' " she said.

### The Internet

Multimedia messaging on school property certainly isn't the only outlet children have used to transmit sexual materials. Social networking Web sites on the Internet provide a forum on which several children, in the privacy of their own bedroom, have posted suggestive photographs and text.

"Martha," resident of a neighboring county, said she caught her 12-year-old daughter "Amy" exchanging lascivious notes with male classmates at her middle school. She learned about the exchanges last month, when she entered Amy's bedroom to check on the sleeping child, whose laptop was resting on her chest. Amy awoke abruptly, and said she would close it herself.

That was a red flag, Martha said, adding that her daughter's suspicious behavior prompted her to view the Web page on the screen. When she did, she found messages that contained explicit content.

For instance, Amy inquired about one boy's sex life, to which he replied that he uses her pictures for sexual gratification; she also asked when she and another boy could have sex, according to transcripts of the messages.

"I was shocked ... in disbelief, but it was right there in

front of my face," Martha said. "She (Amy) couldn't deny it ... "

Martha was appalled by her daughter's use of frank, sexual slang — words that she and her live-in boyfriend don't even use.

"When I asked her about it, she said it was a joke," Martha said. "I told her, 'I'm 30 years old and me and Mark don't talk to each other like that.' "

Martha believes the Internet is to blame for the proliferation of adult language and behaviors among adolescents. However, she said, Amy "didn't act like this until after the separation, divorce, move and her grandmother's death ... plus she just started sixth grade.

"Middle school is completely different — there's older kids and (sexual) experimenting."

Dr. C. Van Rosen, a Daphne psychologist, said the actions of DMS students and Amy are not uncommon for children their age.

"This behavior by children has been going on ever since there were children and this is a variation of 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours,' which has been around since time immemorial," Rosen said. "They're making an issue out of this because it's a new means of doing it: via electronic transmission."

For Amy, the explicit messages likely signal normal sexual development, and are not the product of a hectic home or school life as her mother believed, Rosen said.

"Any parent that believes their children at 12 have not had exposure — through the

media and everyday living — to sexuality and sexually explicit words is extremely naive," he said. "There's no way you're going to quarantine children against this except by the most drastic cult-like activities."

Regarding the DMS students, Rosen expressed concern about the possible legal repercussions. Offenses could range from dissemination or display of child pornography, a class B felony, to material harmful to minors, a misdemeanor, according to police. However, the charges would be handled on a case-by-case basis.

"It would be very difficult to consider this child pornography by any rational person," he said. "To label a child as a sex offender is a monumental decision that's going to affect them the rest of their life in all likelihood and in such a case, as we're talking about, they're taking essentially a variant of normal sexual curiosity and development, and pathologizing it."

Wilhite expressed that the best school for how to deal with sex, as it pertains to new technologies, is in the home.

"The ultimate responsibility lies with the parent who makes the choice of whether or not to buy a cell phone and if the decision is made to buy a cell phone, one would hope that there's a great measure of guidance given to that child," he said.

Parents should teach their kids about sex, rather than hide the issue under the bed, Rosen said.

"First of all, it can't be done," he said of ignoring the issue. "Secondly, it's impractical and it won't work; and third, sexuality is an important part of the world and you need to teach your child to be conversive with it ... and try to train them in your views of it.

"By ignoring it, you're like the person who doesn't vote, who can't complain about the government."