Yahoo! summit focuses on battling cyber bullies

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Yahoo! employees wait for a meeting at the Yahoo! headquarters in Sunnyvale, California, 2009. Educators, police and non-profit groups gathered at Yahoo! on Friday to collaborate on battling cyber bullies and other dangers faced by children on the Internet.

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A capacity crowd of 200 people at Yahoo!'s fourth annual Digital Citizenship Summit were given a peek at a "Generation Safe" program being readied for distribution by iKeepSafe.org.

"It's a road map for school communities to identify and address children at risk," Yahoo! director of child safety Catherine Teitelbaum said of the

program. "There is a role to be played by everyone in a child's life."

High-profile cases of students killing themselves after being tormented or humiliated by cyber bullies pushed the topic to the top of the summit agenda.

"Kids' online and offline lives have merged; it is their real life and when something goes wrong they feel real pain," Teitelbaum said.

As technology firmly grips young lifestyles, students are apt to send out cries for help in Twitter tweets, Facebook updates, instant messages, emails or other Internet Age expressions of what they are thinking or feeling.

Adults in children's lives should befriend them at social networks and "follow" their comments at the hot microblogging service, according to summit goers.

"You have to be there with them," Teitelbaum said. "Parents should use services their kids are using. If you don't know how, ask your child to show you their world."

Adults can try to keep children grounded in the real world with limits such as barring mobile phones during dinner or laptops in bed.

"We used to advise keeping the computer in the most highly-trafficked part of the house, but with the advance of super-powered mobile phones all that advice goes out the window," Teitelbaum said.

"Now, while kids may know the technology better than you, you are the adult and have life experience extremely valuable to their technology use."

While old-time bullying usually could be left behind in some place like a school yard, cyber bullying is broadly and repeatedly shared online making the harm deeper and more lasting, according to summit attendees.

US President Barack Obama on Thursday said his "heart breaks" when he reads about the case of a young man at Rutgers University who committed suicide after a fellow student posted footage of his liaison with another male student on the Internet.

He condemned the "harassment and bullying that just completely gets out of hand" and said his administration was talking about measures to make young people feel safer and called on universities to do more.

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