

Parents, be aware of online scams

By DON STARCOM

THE mother of a 13-year-old girl from Naugatuck, Connecticut in the United States, who got sick eating marijuana-laced candy she bought through a social media contact wants parents to know how quickly online drug deals can take place.

"Parents need to know this happens just like that. She found this guy on Snapchat, he was advertising drugs – it was 15 minutes from her messages with him to when she came into the house sick," she said.

The mother along with several other adult relatives made headlines last week when they duped the man and an alleged accomplice into meeting again for a second drug sale. The family confronted them, then kept both suspects from leaving until police arrived to arrest them.

Police and internet safety experts say the quickly evolving world of social media and apps makes it more important than ever for parents to talk with children about risks on computers, smartphones and game systems.

"I'm trying to protect my daughter," she said. "My daughter is not a child with problems at home. She's an honour student for the past three years. She never gets in trouble. This can happen to any kid."

The girl was with a 10-year-old relative Sunday and apparently found photos of drug-laced candy on Snapchat. She exchanged messages with the man using that account and arranged to buy marijuana-infused candy.

"Within five minutes, they were sick. They didn't look right. They weren't talking right. They went in the house, my daughter said her legs wouldn't work," the mother said.

A relative took both girls to Waterbury Hospital, where physicians gave the younger girl IV fluids and ultimately determined there were no permanent injuries.

"The doctors said it would take about three days to com-



pletely leave their systems. My daughter came home and slept for three days," the woman said.

The woman said parents should know how quickly it can happen – even if they've taken precautions.

"And I'm in my kids' business 24-7. I go through their phones, their messages, their laptops. But it takes just three seconds to send a message through Snapchat, and the message just disappears," she said. "It isn't 20 years ago with house phone and beepers."

"My kids know about drug addiction. They know about being sober. I don't drink or take drugs. I don't even drink coffee – I get my teeth drilled with no Novocaine because I feel so strongly about it," she said. "But kids see drugs on TV. It's all over the internet. They hear drugs make you cool."

She said her daughter told her she tried marijuana to feel like she fit in with other teenagers.

The mother has since taken away her daughter's phone and game system, and closely regulates what she's doing on the school-supplied laptop she uses for classes. She also invited the school resource officer to talk with her daughter about risky behavior and safe ways of dealing with isolation, anxiety or other feelings.

October is Cybersecurity Awareness Month, and experts

advise parents to use the opportunity to brush up on the latest technology that their children use. Keeping them safe from drugs, sexual exploitation or other threats online starts with knowing the ways youngsters can communicate digitally.

"One of the first things parents should do is not be intimidated about trying to learn this," said Scott Driscoll, founder of South Windsor-based Internet Safety Concepts. "There are a lot of things you can learn from the Apple store or from a Google search."

"Communicate with your children about expectations for safety before something happens – make sure they're not talking with strangers; see that their account settings are set to private; do spot checks to look into it," he said.

Driscoll suggested parental controls on software are useful, such as a system that blocks a child or teenager from downloading an app to an iPhone without a parent's password.

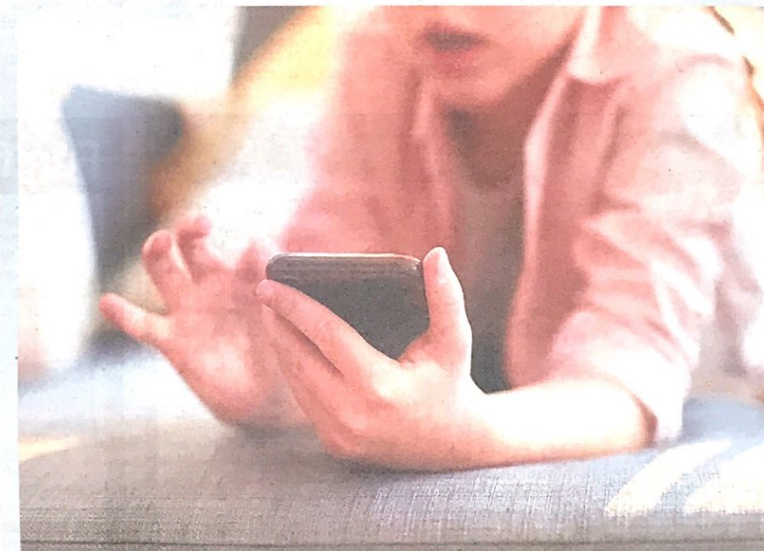
Deputy Chief Colin McAllister of the Naugatuck police agreed, and said his department encourages parents to closely monitor how their children use social media.

"Be very selective in what apps you allow children to use," he said. "There are different kinds of apps where a lot of information is readily available about drugs and illegal contraband items."

Parents should remind youngsters about the risks of sharing personal data, sensitive photos or other information online that could be misused, McAllister said.

Driscoll suggests negotiating contracts with children or teens about technology use and offers samples on his website: internet-safetyconcepts.com/for-families.

"That's a starting point for a conversation. If you don't talk about it before, when something goes wrong the child's first thought may be, 'I better not talk with Mom and Dad. I might get in trouble,'" Driscoll said. – Hartford Courant/Tribune News Service



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