



New Israeli agency helps keep kids safe online

An average of 200 Israelis reach the Child Online Protection Bureau's 105 call center, shown here, every day. Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler.

By HILLEL KUTTLE

A 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL texted a nude video to her boyfriend. Sometime after the couple broke up, she was blackmailed over the video—a threat known as ‘sextortion.’ Mortified, the girl dialed 105, the Child Online Protection Bureau (COPB), headquartered on the outskirts of Ben-Gurion Airport, near Tel Aviv.

Adoreh Eless, a Ministry of Education counselor who works at COPB, calmed the caller and got from her the blackmailer’s Instagram name; the vague Instagram profile rendered the sender’s identity unclear: maybe the ex-boyfriend, maybe another person. Eless conveyed the information to her COPB colleague, a police officer, to investigate, since distributing sexual images of minors is illegal. Eless connected the girl to a second colleague, a social worker with the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services.

“We’ll stop the [video’s] distribution and she’ll get support. She’s not alone now,” Eless said. “It’s very fulfilling. I’m protecting and saving children.”

Eless related the case as an example of COPB’s combatting online threats to children. The problem is acute in Israel, where, according to COPB figures, the average youth is on the computer four-plus hours daily (fourth highest in the world), more than half save potentially embarrassing photographs on their cellular phones, 32 percent have been threatened or verbally abused online, and 28 percent are approached sexually via social media.

According to several officials interviewed during *JUF News*’ early-spring visit to COPB, the bureau is the first of its kind in the world to involve inter-agency collaboration. They are the Ministries of Health; Justice; Education; Public Security, which includes the police department; and Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services.

Since launching last November, COPB has received an average 200 calls daily, said Michal

Zacharia, an Education Ministry expert who is among those staffing the bureau’s around-the-clock call center.

“One minute, you can get a call about a kid being attacked online. The next call can be on a minor matter. We have to treat them both seriously,” said Liat Killner, a police detective who supervises the call center.

Calls generally come from children and their parents, and fall into four categories: cyber-bullying of kids by their peers; sexual harassment; suicidal thoughts and intent; and drug dealers trying to sell to kids.

Medical implications of the stress children experience online include mood disorders and depression, said Michal Breitman, COPB’s director of health affairs who works for the Health Ministry’s suicide-prevention unit.

“Your well-being is highly connected to your health. When they have social problems, [adolescents] tend to be on the Net, so we’re interested in knowing what they’re doing. The Net can worsen their situation,” such as an anorexic girl’s asking in a chat room how to commit suicide, Breitman said.

The threat is real, she said, with 10 Israeli teenagers committing suicide every year.

Breitman is working to equip pediatricians to become what she called COPB’s “gatekeepers” during medical appointments by asking children about their digital lives.

The bureau also is running advertisements and commercials about the perils of crossing the line into inappropriate online behavior.

“Kids don’t always understand the consequences of the content they post online and how it can severely hurt a person. They need to ask themselves: Will it offend someone? If someone would post that about me, would I be happy about it?” said Amir Gefen, a Ministry of Public Security employee who heads COPB’s prevention and community division.

“The majority of cyber-bullying can be pre-

vented. Some kids know what they’re doing and intend to offend someone, but this isn’t the majority,” he said.

COPB representatives encourage people who moderate chat rooms and Internet forums—popular Israeli ones where youth interact anonymously include AskPeople, FXP, and 4girls—to pass along signs of distress they encounter. When that happens, COPB staff members discuss such responses as deploying a police officer and a social worker to a child’s home or school.

“The way the hotline is built, it creates the most optimal solution just from the child’s post,” Breitman said. “We can do it faster because we sit together and talk and can decide on a solution. We then ... get feedback on how the child is.”

The activity also is proactive. Bureau officials meet countrywide with principals, teachers, guidance counselors, community officials, social-service agencies, and parents to alert them to COPB’s resources.

Call-center staffers speak Arabic, Amharic, Russian, and English, in addition to Hebrew; some specialize in the ultra-Orthodox community. Several have advanced training and education—Zacharia earned a Ph.D. on bullying, emotional abuse, and violence against children at school by their peers, and Gefen is doing his doctorate in cyber-bullying.

Gefen worked for seven years in the telecommunications industry before shifting into tackling cyber-crime. He joined the Ministry of Education’s cyber-safety department before working for the Ministry of Public Safety.

“It’s, in a way, like working for a start-up,” Gefen said of his new hi-tech career. “We develop and refine as we go along.” ■

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