

Police warn of Facebook chat coercion

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By HILARY MATHESON/Daily Inter Lake

Online threats targeting high school girls around the Flathead Valley are being described as blackmail by Flathead High School Resource Officer Cory Clarke.

Someone has tried to connect recently with students ranging in age from 14 through 20 through Facebook's instant chat, attempting to coerce them into sending revealing or nude photos, then contacting other people on the students' friend lists using the same tactic.

Clarke issued a warning to students on Facebook that authorities became aware of the situation Wednesday and it is being investigated by local and federal law enforcement.

Clarke said the offending user's profile has been shut down more than three times but continues to resurface.

The profile is currently under the guise of a former student's name, slightly modified. This may be to establish a link to the Flathead Valley and why Clarke emphasized that students should not reply to, send photos or personal information to people with whom they aren't actually friends or haven't met.

The similar almost scripted questions and responses in the chat conversations start out by leading students to answer by saying they have something important involving them.

"This unsettles them, so they respond," Clarke said.

If students who reply using a computer or cellphone, that opens them up to hacking and access to any photos.

Once a student responds, the coercion begins. The user claims to have "dirty pics" of the girl and will post them unless the student sends "new pics." In return, the user promises to "delete everything and drop it."

"It's the same last line every time," Clarke said.

Clarke personally recommends that students disable the Facebook chat capabilities on their phones and computers.

Anyone with new information should contact Flathead or Glacier high school at 751-3500 or 758-8602 and ask to speak to the school resource officer.

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