

Watchwords by Officer Tom Hanshaw
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Over the past couple weeks; I've been visiting with students at the Cashman and Amesbury Elementary Schools, as part of the annual crime prevention efforts. I generally spend 35-45 minutes with each group, consisting of two or three classes, and cover a variety of safety topics. This year was actually the 16th time that I've visited with students at each school and I'd like to express thanks to the staff for helping keep the children of our community safer. Their support is critical to the success of the program as the office staff juggles schedules to accommodate my visits and teachers help to generate student participation.

If you have a child or two at the Cashman or Amesbury Elementary School, hopefully he or she has mentioned seeing me recently. I actually encourage students to continue the safety discussion at home with parents and guardians, because frequent conversations are beneficial to all. It seems there are more and more dangers to be concerned with today, so keeping children safe is a full-time task. Over the sixteen years I've been doing the talks, I certainly have noticed a number of changes with students; they are growing up at an earlier age. Whether they are using a cell phone, are staying home alone or have access to the Internet, times have changed from the mid-1990s. I've also had to add the topics like, what to do if they find a needle, since numerous have been seen along streets and in playgrounds in Amesbury.

With each group, we discuss common topics such as using 911, stranger-danger, automobile safety and bicycle riding. Depending upon their grade, I also review the role of a police officer, bullying, home-alone, computer safety, dealing with peer pressure and the dangers of drugs and alcohol. With students in kindergarten, I explain how police officers are there to help them and that they should not be afraid of police. I encourage older kids to communicate with parents and school staff when they have questions or concerns and talk about the importance of good decision making. After the presentation, each grade watches a short video about strangers, wearing a safety belt, using 911 or riding a bicycle safely.

Following the video, students are given the opportunity to ask questions, share comments or reiterate what we've discussed. I must admit, some of the stories are quite comical and the questions posed come at an adult level. Yes, I've heard about "mom being pulled over," "dialing 911 by accident" and about grandparents who "don't wear a seat belt." I always encourage teachers to continue the discussion after returning to class, so I'm sure they have stories to tell as well. Before leaving, students this year were presented with a "thumbs-up" pen, with the message "thumbs up for safety," as a reminder that safety is cool.

Keeping children safe is the role of the entire community, from the time they first enroll in school until Graduation Day. During my visit to the Cashman School, a story appeared on the television news about a 7 year old girl in Georgia, who successfully fought off an abductor. The girl explained later how she learned what to do and this story had a happy ending with the perpetrator being arrested. We live in a very safe community but a challenging world, so everyone needs to have some safety awareness. I explain to students that "practice makes perfect," so the more they practice safety tips, the safer they'll be. A brief conversation at the supper table, on the drive to school or while playing in the yard can go a long way. It also

encourages children to talk about the issues relative to them, which becomes even more important as they grow older.

In closing, I'd like to transition from the Elementary Schools to the High School and mention the Grad Night Program for the Class of 2012. Although June is still a couple months away, planning is well underway for the annual post-graduation celebration for this year's class. A solicitation was recently sent to several businesses in the community and your support is truly appreciated. This is the 12th year of Grad Night, a supervised, substance-free and surprise-filled night of activities. The planning committee is comprised of volunteer parents, alumni and community members who work throughout the year to make this program possible. Grad Night provides graduates with a safe night of celebrating with their classmates after one of the most exciting events in their lifetime. Donations help make the upcoming and future Grad Night celebrations possible. Donations may be made to the AHS Grad Night Program, PO Box 57, Amesbury, MA or dropped off at the High School. Your support is truly appreciated and needed.