



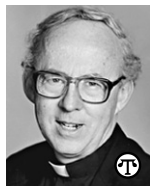
# FAMILY SPOTLIGHT

THOUGHTS FROM GIRLS AND BOYS TOWN



## Instant Messaging: What Parents Should Know

*Father Val J. Peter, JCD, STD (NAPSA)*—What's the hottest thing for junior high kids across America? It's not cell phones, DVDs or games. It is IM (instant messaging), and it is something every parent should know about.



Val J. Peter

Recently, I played "Denny the Dunce" while asking some eighth graders why IM is so popular. A bright lad in the back raised his hand and informed me: "It's so much better than e-mail or cell phones."

Why? Because IM is impersonal. You can say things you wouldn't say face-to-face. And you can send it to almost everyone in the school at once.

I was surprised that 74 percent of teens are online regularly and a whopping 37 percent say they have used IM to say things they wouldn't have said face-to-face.

Parents, this may sound innocent enough on the surface, but examples we've seen show a more troubling trend. Children trashing another's reputation, starting horrible stories about a rival, sexually harassing a troubled classmate, spreading gross rumors, and expressing dark anger. Some of the harassment is even crossing over to more traditional forms of bullying. We are seeing children get reputations they did not earn. And no expression of remorse from the kids spreading the lies and rumors.

When we were young, our parents taught us not to use vile language because they knew it would make us become crass, coarse and

insensitive. If they heard us use this language, they would correct us and maybe even give us consequences so we would think twice about doing it again.

Now, think of how easy it is to do these things in the cyber world—to be foulmouthed, a gossip and just a mean, nasty person.

As parents, you need to ask your kids about instant messaging. Find out how popular it is, how many kids in their class use it and how they misuse it. In many cases, your children will tell you the truth: "Mom, it's totally gross."

You can check it out yourself. There are ways of monitoring these messages, and you will be surprised at how mean kids can be to one another. Put a stop to this misuse in the social life of your own son or daughter. Teach your children to not spread rumors and how they can become advocates for kids who are being victimized. Let them stand up for what is right. You will be glad you did. For more information on this and other bullying topics, visit [www.parenting.org](http://www.parenting.org) or call the Girls and Boys Town National Hotline toll-free at 1-800-448-3000.

Girls and Boys Town, the original Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, is a leader in the direct treatment and care of abused, abandoned and neglected girls and boys. Through 19 sites across the country, the organization directly cares for more than 37,000 girls and boys annually. Girls and Boys Town also assists 1.5 million children and parents through its National Hotline (1-800-448-3000), outreach and training programs and community partnerships.

