

New app launched to curb bullying, abuse

DAILY NEWS REPORTER

A GROUND-breaking cell-phone application launched in Durban yesterday is all set to help fight bullying, sexual assault and physical abuse.

A world first, it has been specifically designed for schools to give children a safe, instant and anonymous tool to report abuse “and any of the challenges facing children today”.

It has been created by a Durban specialised child abuse investigation business, headed by a former Child Protection Unit police officer, Marc Hardwick, 44, director of The Guardian Group child investigation company.

Studies by the University of Cape Town revealed that more than 750 000 children will have been sexually abused by the time they reach 17, which equates to one in every three children.

Childline SA says that only one in 10 cases are reported and only one in seven are successfully prosecuted.

The Guardian Group believe that not only will the app help to support children who have been abused, but it will also ensure that the perpetrators are brought to book.

Schools which sign up for the app will pay a monthly fee of about R500, but it will be free to pupils at the school who have downloaded the app from either the Play Store or Apple App Store.

This enables them to report on issues that they or their friends are experiencing.

Hardwick explained that the system was set up to make sure that only a predefined staff member could access reports that were made about abuse or bullying, with the investiga-

tion being managed by a senior staff member using the reporting system technology.

When a report is submitted, it goes to the e-mail of the pre-defined staff members, telling them to log into the system to access details of the report “and take the necessary action to safeguard the child”.

The staff member can ask for further information if necessary from the person making the report, but will never know his or her identity.

“This is extremely important to us, as the power of this app is ensuring the anonymity of the reporter,” Hardwick said.

Anonymity

If the school investigation concludes that a forensic investigation is needed, in the case of rape or a sexual assault case for instance, the school can either refer the issue to The Guardian investigators or to the police.

“This is important because in a case of bullying, for example, if the bully checked the reporter’s phone and found that the anonymous reporting app was there, he would know who had made the report. But if every pupil has the app it further protects the anonymity of the reporter,” Hardwick explained.

A “very basic” version of the app was tested last September and Hardwick sent e-mails to 33 000 schools and was interviewed on TV.

After that, his phone never stopped ringing and hundreds of schools were interested in implementing it.

He teamed up with businessmen and got financial backing to develop structures to allow the app to be sustainable for the high local demand.