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“It’s 2026: Do You Know What Your Kids Are Struggling With?”

Local Leaders Launch Campaign to Address the Youth Mental Health Crisis as Students Go Back to School

New report sounds the alarm on emerging dangers facing young people in Central Florida and gives parents practical tools to protect their children

ORLANDO, Fla. (Sept. 4, 2026) — As Central Florida students return to school, many are carrying more than backpacks. Would you know if your child were gambling online, being contacted by a stranger through a game app, or using a vape purchased through social media?

Many parents do not recognize the challenges their children are navigating until serious problems have already developed. Today, Orlando-based nonprofit **Breaking Thru** launches the **Parent Pledge**, a new parent-led campaign providing Central Florida families with practical resources for navigating the modern youth mental-health crisis.

“As kids go back to school, they are facing some of the most serious mental-health dangers we have ever seen,” said **Andrae Bailey**, co-founder of Breaking Thru. “These threats are reaching children younger, following them home, and evolving faster than most parents realize. Too often, what parents think they know about their child’s world is already out of date.”

The new report spotlights six dangers parents need to understand as their children head back to school, including:

- ✓ **Screen addiction and sleep loss:** Local teens average more than eight and a half hours of entertainment screen time a day. Young people spending more than three hours daily on social media face twice the risk of depression and anxiety symptoms, while heavy screen use is also associated with significantly poorer sleep.
- ✓ **Online gambling:** More than one in three U.S. youth ages 11 to 17 have bet on sports, rising to nearly half of boys by age 17. In Florida, online gambling help contacts have risen sharply since the legalization of online sports betting.
- ✓ **Cyberbullying:** Nearly one in five high school students report being bullied at school, while 13% have stayed home at least once because they did not feel safe. Online cruelty can follow young people home and often goes unreported.



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- ✓ **Online predators and exploitation:** The Central Florida Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force investigated approximately 20,000 CyberTips in 2024. Predators are increasingly using gaming, social media, messaging platforms, and even generative AI to target and exploit children.
- ✓ **Dangerous new drugs:** Drug dealers are using social media and online messaging platforms to sell illicit pills to Central Florida teenagers, and law enforcement warns that pills marketed as study drugs or party drugs may be counterfeit and laced with fentanyl, making a single pill potentially fatal.
- ✓ **Isolation and the relationship crisis:** Young people are spending less time with friends in person, while 72% of U.S. teens have used an AI companion, and one in three have discussed something serious with AI instead of another person. The report identifies isolation as an underlying danger that can increase vulnerability to the other five.

“We know immediately when a child breaks a bone or comes home bleeding,” Bailey said. “But many young people are struggling with gambling, bullying, nicotine, exploitation, poor sleep, or emotional distress while the adults closest to them have no idea.”

The Parent Pledge asks parents to make three commitments: **1)** *Keep learning about the ever-evolving pressures children face.* **2)** *Build a relationship where your child feels safe telling the truth.* **3)** *Act when you see a warning sign or sense something is wrong.*

At **ParentPledge.net**, parents can sign the pledge and access practical tools, warning-sign checklists, conversation guides, and other resources for navigating the modern youth mental health crisis.

The leaders behind the Parent Pledge include Seminole County **Sheriff Dennis Lemma**; community leader **Dick Batchelor**; LifeWords Group founder **C. Dwight Bain, LMHC, NCC, CLC**; and Breaking Thru spokesperson and current Miss Florida Runner-Up **Halle Burton**.

Breaking Thru and its community partners will hold a press conference on **Wednesday, Sept. 9, from 11 a.m. to noon at the Seminole County Sheriff’s Office** to release *The State of Youth Mental Health: Six Dangers Every Parent Should Fear This School Year* and discuss the dangers facing Central Florida children and families. Lemma, Bailey, and Burton will be available for media interviews.

About Breaking Thru

Breaking Thru is an initiative focused on the modern mental-health crisis affecting Gen Z and Gen Alpha. It brings together parents, educators, healthcare professionals, faith leaders, employers, law enforcement, and other community leaders to strengthen support for young people navigating today’s challenges. Breaking Thru’s innovative seven-pillar model takes a holistic approach to youth mental well-being by addressing seven critical areas of a young person’s life:

Purpose & Values • Physical Health • Technology, Social Media, & AI Substances • Relationships • Employment & Finances • Trauma

The **Parent Pledge** translates this framework into practical tools that help parents understand their children’s experiences, begin important conversations, recognize warning signs, and connect families with support.

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