Kids, public libraries and internet access...

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Having followed the debates in the American literature for some time, I have been surprised at the relatively low level of debate amongst Australian librarians on their role and responsibilities in relation to children and the internet. In terms of public access to the internet within public libraries the most emotional debates that I have been privy to have focussed more on issues of charging (or, rather, vehement arguments about not charging) and whether it is appropriate for customers accessing the internet in a public library to use e-mail. Certainly these are important issues but, in my opinion, not nearly as fascinating as the potential social dilemma of children using the internet in our public libraries.

Perhaps public libraries have been lulled into a false sense of security having installed filtering software. Others may have achieved a comfort zone by getting parents to sign a disclaimer when their children join the library. These are the measures we introduced in our medium-sized public library when implementing public access to the internet.

After a dream-run with no problems, our complacency has been severely shaken in recent weeks after an irate adult confronted desk staff to report that a child was looking at 'disgusting' pictures on the internet. Our worst nightmares were confirmed when we found that 'someone' had disabled the filtering software and the nine-year-old was having an accelerated education in areas that he probably should never be educated in! Our second shock came when we found a number of parents refusing to sign the disclaimer thereby indicating that they did not give their child permission to use the internet. How on earth can we police this? we asked ourselves. What sort of trap have we set for ourselves?

It was about this time that we discovered a wonderful website through the American Library Association's home page — *The librarian's guide to cyberspace for parents and kids* (http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/criteria.html). For those who have not discovered it, this site offers 'safety tips' for parents, pointing out 'just as you

teach your child rules about dealing with strangers outside the home, you must provide rules for communicating online.'

The safety tips go beyond the obvious issue of pornography. They focus on appropriate behaviours and etiquette when using the internet, including never giving your name, address, or telephone number without parental permission and not responding to messages that are scary or make you uncomfortable.

These safety tips seem ideal for introduction in Australian public libraries, emphasising the shared responsibility of parents and librarians in ensuring that children use the internet responsibly. Of course, we will still need to use filtering software but, as the safety tips emphasise, 'Even if filters were 100 per cent effective, this software is no substitute for parental guidance.'

I see no problems in public librarians working with parents to develop safe and wise use of the internet. Perhaps it is not so much a social dilemma as simply another situation that we need to manage. ■