

The Internet & Our Children

A COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Illinois Library Association

Our children are growing up

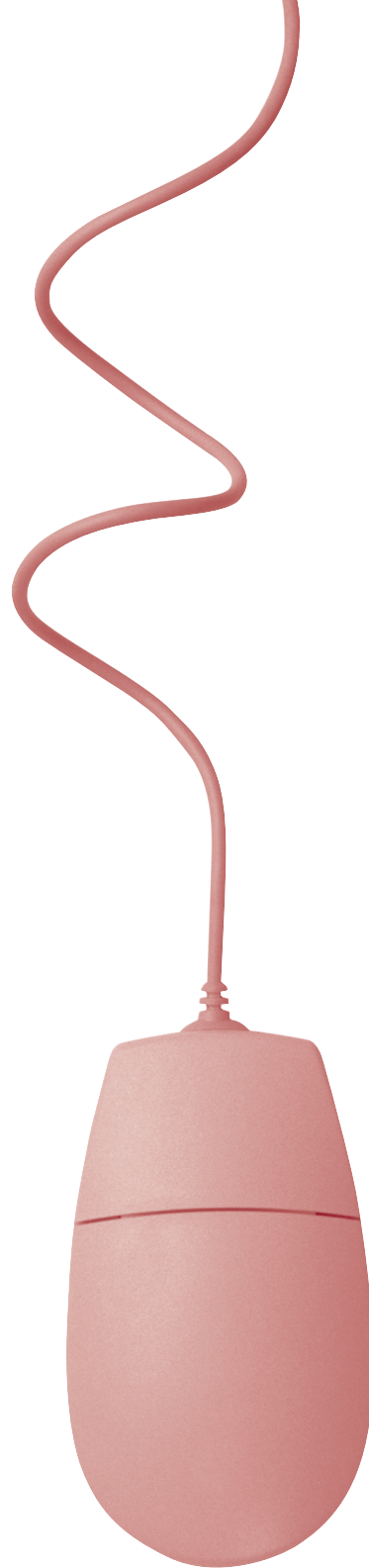
in a global information society. Librarians — in partnership with parents, educators, law enforcement officials, elected officials, online corporations, public interest groups, and the media — must learn, and then teach our children the critical viewing and thinking skills that will help them decipher and evaluate this new world of information online. Working together, we can help each other make sure the Internet is a positive experience for our kids.

The Internet is an innovative and exciting learning tool. At the touch of a key, you can read the *London Times*, watch a volcano erupt on a computer screen, learn how to apply a tourniquet, or fix a car. You can read an interactive story with your child, “visit” Hawaii, or view an original copy of Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. You can also send instant electronic mail to anyone anywhere in the world or even chat with them in real time.

The sheer volume of places to go and things to do online can be overwhelming. It can also make it difficult to find exactly what you want. In fact, some people have compared cyberspace to an enormous library with all of its materials dumped in one big heap on the floor.

Librarians are experts at selecting, organizing, and categorizing information, ideas, and images in all kinds of formats, making them easier to find and use. Today we are learning how to apply those same skills to cyberspace, so you and your child can take advantage of its vast resources.

As with radio, movies, and television before it, the Internet — as a new medium — poses concerns for thoughtful users. Teaching our children to use the Internet safely and responsibly is a big concern that parents and librarians share. While the vast majority of Internet sites are perfectly safe, the virtual world — like the real world — has its problematic side. Sexually explicit images and offensive language are the chief sources of concern. Other serious issues include online privacy, sites that emphasize hate or violence, and the specter of adults making inappropriate online contact with children. A growing number of concerns now include access to alcohol, prescription drugs, and gambling via the Internet.



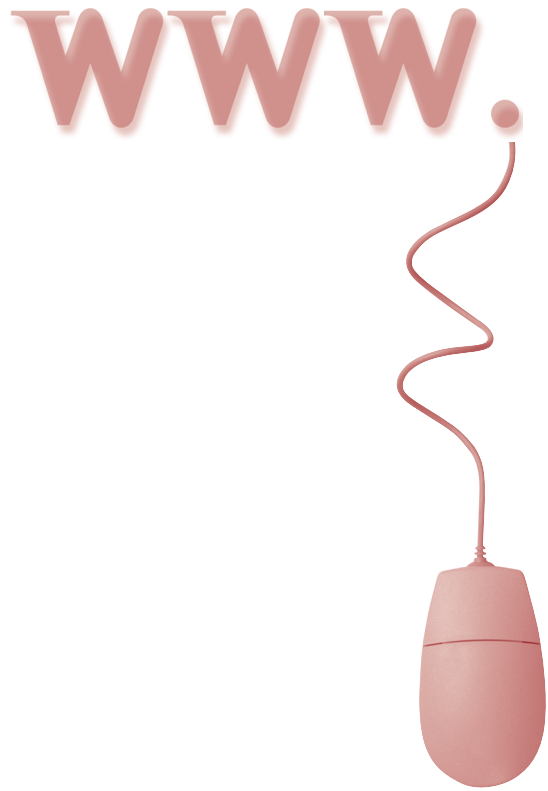
What can parents do?

First, realize it's normal for parents to feel anxious when their children get involved with a new technology that we don't fully understand and don't feel comfortable using. Previous generations experienced some of these same concerns about telephones, video games, and television.

Second, it's important for parents to educate themselves about this technology and the myriad opportunities for fun and learning that it offers. Just as there are different television programs and different kinds of magazines — some appropriate for kids of certain ages and some not appropriate for kids at all — there are many types of places to visit in cyberspace.

Spending time online with your child is one of the best ways to learn and teach responsibility, good conduct, and the values that are important to you. Ask children to share their favorite Web sites and what they like about them. Help them discover Web sites that can help them with their homework, hobbies, and other special interests. Consider locating your home computer in a family area where use can be shared and monitored. Teach your children "netiquette" — how to behave online. Such straightforward rules as not typing in all capital letters (it looks like you are shouting), being polite, and keeping quiet in chat rooms until you get a sense of what people are talking about, are good manners other online users expect. There are Web sites to help you learn such rules, with links to helpful information for you and your children. One such site is GetNetWise (www.getnetwise.org), an online family resource developed by a coalition of Internet industry corporations and public interest organizations, including the American Library Association.

Third, the best way to ensure your child's safety on the Internet is to be there. Of course, that is not always possible. Just as you teach your child rules about dealing with strangers outside the home, you must provide rules for communicating online.



Here are some suggested rules for children:

- Always ask your parents' permission before using your full name, address, telephone number, or school name anywhere on the Internet.
- Always tell your parents or other adults you trust if you see something online that is scary or that you don't understand.
- Don't respond to messages that make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy. Tell a parent or caregiver.
- Never give out a credit card number or password online.
- Never arrange to meet someone you've met online unless you discuss it with your parents and an adult goes with you.
- Be a wise consumer in cyberspace. Not everything you see or hear may be true. Some sites may be trying to sell you something. Always check with your parent or caregiver before responding to online sales promotions.

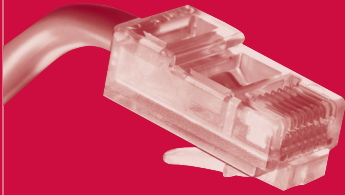
As a parent, you may choose to regulate what your child can access via the Internet by installing a commercial filtering product on your home computer. The oldest method of filtering is keyword blocking, which blocks sites that contain specific words or phrases. A newer method is host or site blocking, in which specific Internet sites are selected for blocking. With all filtering products, you need to install the software and then select what information will be screened out. Be aware, however, all these methods can result in the unintentional blocking of useful material.

Filters also can promote a false sense of security. During a recent U.S. Congressional hearing on filters, Senator Hollings from South Carolina asked if filters could really work to block kids from inappropriate material. Dr. Peter Nickerson, president and CEO of N2H2, a server-based Internet filtering company, answered, "It works where it is in place, but kids can always get around it." Further, filters are not effective in preventing strangers from e-mailing or chatting with children. They are no substitute for parental guidance. Children need guidance in learning critical viewing and thinking skills and in making wise choices.

What is the role of libraries and librarians?

The library's mission is to provide the fullest possible access by everyone in the community to all constitutionally protected forms of expression. Libraries are designed to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. The role of librarians as "information navigators" is to advise and assist users in selecting specific material appropriate to their needs and interests from among the many resources the library has provided. With the advent of the Internet, even the smallest and most remote library has the potential to offer its users access on a universal scale. The introduction and proliferation of electronic resources in libraries has greatly expanded the amount and variety of information made available. While the range of choice is wider, the principle of library service and open access remains the same: the final decision rests with the user. Adults make their own choices, and only parents have the right and responsibility to restrict the choices of their own children.

In 1999, the World Wide Web had about 3.6 million sites, of which 2.2 million were publicly accessible. Findings indicate that adult content claims a tiny percentage of the Web. In 1999, the most popular resources on the Internet were music-related.



How can librarians help parents?

First, librarians with their local board of directors need to establish a local Internet use policy and share it with the community. The policy should explain how and why the library provides Internet access, what is appropriate behavior and inappropriate behavior when using the Internet in the library, and what the penalties are for inappropriate behavior. This policy should apply equally to all Internet users, adults and children.

The policy should explain how the library regulates public Internet access in order to provide equitable access for all users. Such regulations may include reasonable time, place, and manner limits on access; installation of privacy screens or recessed monitors; patron sign-up and identification requirements for Internet sessions; and a requirement that users acknowledge their understanding of the library's Internet use policies. Parents' responsibility for supervising their children's use of library resources, including Internet access, should be spelled out. The policy should also explain what methods the library employs to maintain a secure environment for all library users, particularly Internet users.

If the library decides to offer Internet users the option of filtered access in addition to unfiltered access, this should be stated in the policy. If the library allows parents to designate a level of Internet access for their own children, the policy should explain the implementation procedures.

Because the Internet is a new and rapidly changing technology, libraries should be flexible: all library policies should be reviewed on a regular basis, but technology policies may need to be updated and revised more frequently. Most importantly, the library should make sure that library users are aware of the policy regulating Internet access. Copies of the policy should be readily available and staff should be trained not only to implement policy, but to explain it and to answer questions about it.

Second, librarians can direct parents and kids to quality Web sites, just as we recommend good books, videos, and other resources. For example, the Illinois Library Association publishes a list of recommended sites, *Cyberguide for Kids and Parents*. The cyberguide is a great learning tool that offers Web sites and definitions, safety tips, and selection advice to help parents and children become savvy and wise Web travellers.

The American Association of School Librarians, a division of the American Library Association, has created a Web site that includes online courses, student and family activities, and an online tour (www.ala.org/ICONN). A part of that Web site, FamiliesConnect, is designed to teach parents, caregivers, and extended families how to use and navigate the Internet together. It contains an online course, the top 10 Web sites selected by school librarians, and a discussion of how children may effectively use the Internet.

Libraries often develop their own Web page for parents, children, and teens, with direct links to recommended resources, or a selection of age-appropriate search engines, such as Ask Jeeves for Kids (www.askjeeves.com). Some libraries have successfully found that providing a menu of age-appropriate sites and child-oriented search engines reinforces the library tradition of selecting materials and designing services for children based on their reading level, emotional and intellectual maturity, and interest areas. Rather than limiting all searches through one filtering system or providing access to only those sites deemed appropriate for children by one search engine, these libraries offer a choice of search engines to ensure that children will find the information needed through a combination of resources.

Finally, librarians are interested in working with parents and others within the community to teach children and teens how to use the library and the Internet safely and wisely. Children are most at risk when they are left on their own for long periods of time in a public place, with minimal or no supervision. Parents are urged to come to the library with their kids to see what is offered and to supervise their children's use of library resources. The best way to ensure that the library remains a safe place for kids is for the library to be a place that families use together.

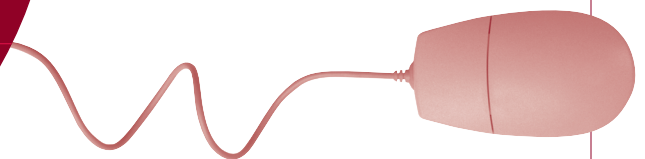
Should libraries use filters?

It is often suggested that libraries should filter the Internet to prohibit access to offensive sites. Filters are designed to exclude. The user selects categories to be blocked and the level of blocking for each category. Filters, however, restrict access to more sites and information than intended. The ambiguity of language itself, along with the subjectivity in determining what is objectionable to everyone, create a problem. Filters inevitably block material that is considerably broader in scope than the specific kinds of expression the courts have held to be outside the protection of the First Amendment. The result is that legal and useful material is not available to library users. Examples of sites that have been prohibited by popular commercial blocking/filtering products include an astonishing scope of topics: breast cancer, AIDS, women's rights, sexual harassment, the Earl of Saxon, the Green Bay Packers, the Quakers, the Heritage Foundation, the American Association of University Women, golfer Fred Couples, and the Mars Exploration.

The Illinois library community is closely monitoring legislation and court decisions for guidance on library Internet access. Two recent significant decisions have been instructive. On June 26, 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that federal legislative attempts to limit access to the Internet in the name of protecting citizens — the Communications Decency Act — was unconstitutional. In another significant decision, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia declared that a highly restrictive Internet policy, including the use of X-Stop filtering software on *all* Internet workstations as imposed on Loudoun County libraries, was invalid for adults under the free speech provisions of the First Amendment. The November 1998 Loudoun ruling speaks to adults' First Amendment rights; it did not address minors' access to the Internet in public libraries.

In addition to these court rulings, it is often noted that when libraries restrict children to filtered Internet access, it may imply a contract with parents that their children will not be able to access certain material on the Internet. Since filters are imperfect, some "objectionable" sites will still be accessible while other valuable sites will be blocked. Libraries will be unable to fulfill the implied contract, due to the technological limitations of the software, thus exposing themselves to possible legal liability and litigation.

Filtering, much like any acquisition choice or any aspect of collection development, is a decision best left to local officials.



What are local library considerations regarding the use of filters?

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Illinois libraries is that each one is different, reflecting the interests and needs of its own community of users. Just as a library's collections, services, and programs are community-based, so are its policies and procedures, including its Internet access policy and procedures. Based on community input and professional experience, library staff develops policies and procedures to be presented to the library board for consideration and approval.

A library board may decide that the interests of the community will be better served if the library offers its users the option of filtered Internet access in addition to full Internet access. If a library offers filtered access as an option, it is important that all users fully understand their choices. Users must be able to tell which stations are filtered and which are not, or when filters are off and when they are turned on.

Patrons should be offered a clear description of the kind(s) of filters being used, the settings, and how they operate. The filter should report when and which sites are blocked and why, and librarians should be able to review and override the block upon the request of the user. Users should be able to select unfiltered access at any time, without the permission or intervention of library staff.

Library policy may distinguish between age-appropriate interests and needs of young children and adolescents. Traditionally, the children and young adult sections contain materials selected for these groups, although they are not restricted to those areas. The same holds true for the Internet. Parents, however, should have the right to determine the level of access they believe is appropriate for their own child. Children should not be limited or restricted to filtered access, unless that is the specific directive of their parents or legal guardians. Librarians should be able to review and override the block upon request of the child's parent or legal guardian.

How can law enforcement officials, the media, and legislators help?

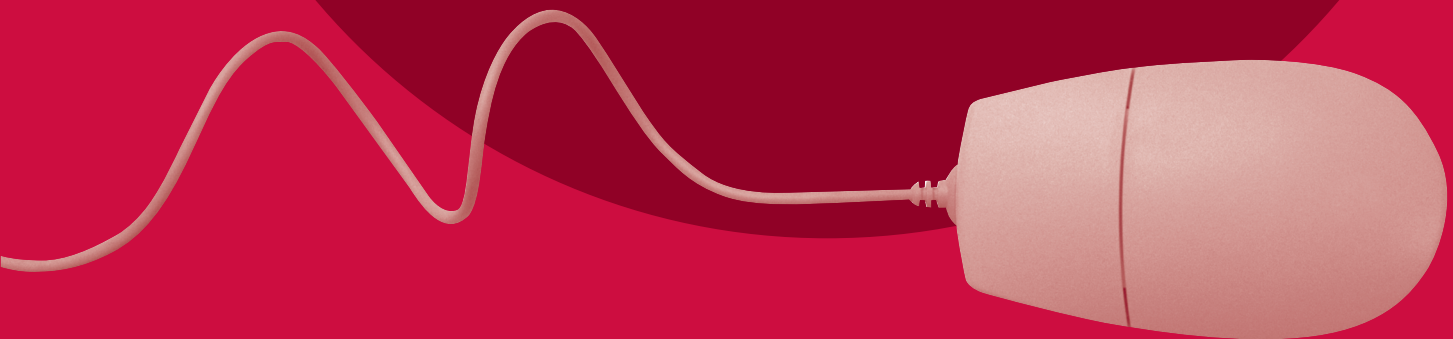
As mentioned previously, the Internet provides an overwhelming amount and variety of information and images. Findings indicate that adult content claims a tiny proportion of the Web. Some of the most objectionable material on the Internet, in fact, is not constitutionally protected and has been deemed illegal. Law enforcement agencies need to enforce all existing laws governing child pornography, obscenity, and child molestation, both online and off. These agencies can help librarians identify potential security issues and risks and work with librarians to find acceptable solutions.

The media can help us understand the issues and avoid "quick fix" attitudes. The media can portray the Internet in all its complexities — the good and the bad — and educate the public about the support available to parents from schools, libraries, and other community organizations. Media personalities who engage in honest discussion of the issues and provide thoughtful analysis are a welcome antidote to sensational soundbites.

Legislators need to learn about the Internet and how the new technology works and understand the constitutional implications involved in policy-making. Policies should be crafted in cooperation with broadly based partners to properly address legal issues, security and privacy concerns, and public good.

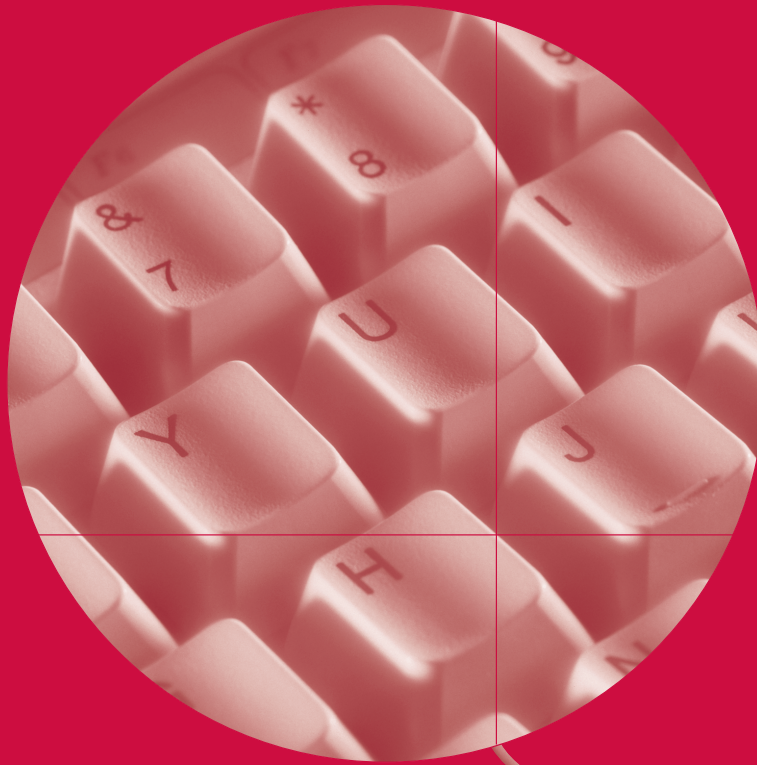


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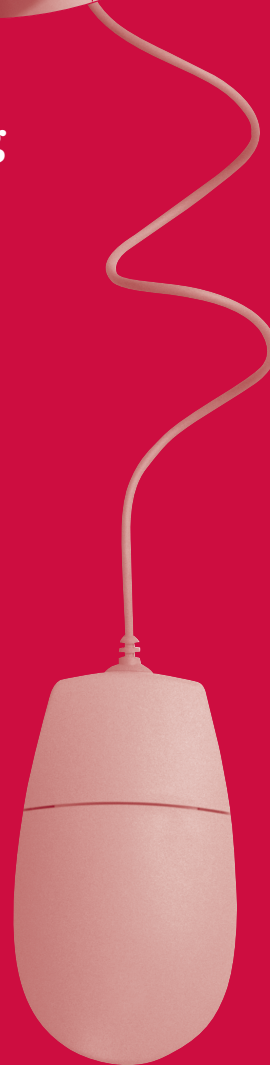


Conclusion

Our children are growing up in a global information society. Librarians — in partnership with parents, educators, law enforcement officials, elected officials, online corporations, public interest groups, and the media — must learn, and then teach our children the critical viewing and thinking skills that will help them decipher and evaluate this new world of information online. People of all ages must be able to distinguish between information that is useful and valuable and that which is not — to assess, as well as to access. The Internet offers an exciting world to children, but it is essential that they learn to handle and reject content that may be offensive to their values, to respect many different points of view, and to adhere independently to online safety rules when confronted with uncomfortable situations. They must learn to make wise use of new information technologies and be accountable for safe and responsible online behavior. The entire community, including parents, public officials, media representatives, and librarians, can work together, each fulfilling our proper role to support children in learning to be wise consumers of new information technologies.



Parents and librarians working together can prepare children for the future by teaching critical viewing and thinking skills that will help them decipher and assess this new world of information online.





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1. ILA asserts that Internet policy is appropriately developed at the local library level rather than at a state or federal level.
 2. Filters provide a false sense of security and can block access to constitutionally-protected speech.
 3. Libraries are partners with parents to help children identify quality Web sites, to learn how to use the Internet, and to become savvy users of information.
 4. Parents and only parents (not the government) have the right and responsibility to determine their own children's access — and only their own children's access — to library resources, including the Internet.
 5. People of all ages must be able to distinguish between information that is useful and valuable and that which is not — to assess, as well as to access.
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Single copies of *The Internet and Our Children* are available free.
Multiple copies are available in packets of 25 copies for \$12, plus \$2 shipping via library rate.