

Of course we don't hate children, and some of us are particularly fond of dogs, but the issue of unattended children in libraries is one that won't go away no matter how hard we wish it would. Maplewood Library in the US threatening to close its doors between 3 and 5pm on school days (apparently they didn't) has really sparked the debate again.

Libraries are between a rock and a hard place on this one. While we want people to see libraries as safe places and welcoming to all members of the community, and indeed we work hard to attract children into our libraries, there is much concern and disquiet when we become de facto child care centres, with children being left for – sometimes – hours at a stretch.

This issue has been exacerbated with the popularity of public access PCs in libraries, where some children spend all day during school holidays; often on a game that has the equivalent effect of a child ingesting four bottles of red cordial – Runescape. Rather than ban this game (and its players) our Eltham branch worked in partnership with Council staff and youth workers to create a web-page called 'Crystalscape' about how to play Runescape. As well as the webpage, the group made a poster for a code of conduct in the library; held a session on communication and conflict resolution; developed an 'expert for the day' system; and also had

a session on the importance of physical activity, stretching and taking time out. Of course this is a strategy that works for older children but not for younger ones.

At our library, our policy is based on the premise that we welcome library use by children and want to provide a safe and appropriate environment for visitors of all ages. However, we are a public building with staff trained to provide public library services. We are not equipped, and it is not our role, to provide long or short-term childcare. Our regulations say that for the safety and comfort of children, a responsible adult or caregiver should accompany children while they are using the library. While in the library, parents and caregivers are responsible for monitoring and regulating the behaviour of their children.

We have issued guidelines for staff on how they should respond to situations such as unattended children found frightened or crying in the library; exhibiting inappropriate or harmful behaviour; or not being met by a responsible caregiver at closing time. These guidelines are designed to meet our duty of care as well as ensuring that parents are responsible for their children. The policy is at [http://www.yprl.vic.gov.au/about/supervision\\_children.htm](http://www.yprl.vic.gov.au/about/supervision_children.htm) and we are happy to share our guidelines.



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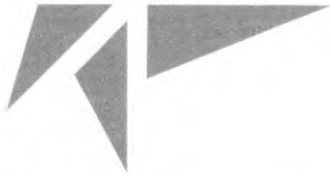
The issue was also raised at a Viclink meeting a couple of years back and the Children's and Youth Services sub-committee gathered together various policies dealing with unattended children. In particular they highlighted the Children's Policy Guidelines for NSW Public Libraries (developed by State Library NSW) which is a quite strongly worded statement: [http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pls/policies/pdf/childrens\\_policy\\_2005.pdf](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pls/policies/pdf/childrens_policy_2005.pdf)

I think the main things to remember are that we do have a duty of care whether we like it or not, we want to be welcoming, and our staff need to know how to respond when they have issues with unattended children in the library.

And as the (not so great) 19th century writer, Mary Howitt says:

God sent children for another purpose than merely to keep up the race – to enlarge our hearts, to make us unselfish, and full of kindly sympathies and affections; to give our souls higher aims, and to call out all our faculties to extended enterprise and exertion; to bring round our fireside bright faces and happy smiles, and loving tender hearts. My Soul blesses the Great Father every day, that he has gladdened the earth with Little Children.

**Christine Mackenzie**  
CEO, Yarra Plenty Regional Library



## PNG's top librarian suffers fatal heart attack

The Director General of the Office of Libraries and Archives of Papua New Guinea, Daniel Paraide, 49, died unexpectedly on 15 December 2006. The *PNG Post-Courier* reported that he had a heart attack while travelling in Port Moresby. Efforts to revive him at the Pacific International Hospital were unsuccessful.

He had led efforts to upgrade the National Library and was to begin work in early 2007 as manager of the K7 million AusAID project to refurbish the library – an anniversary gift to PNG from the Australian people.

PNG's Acting Prime Minister Don Polye later proposed a program to monitor the health and medical conditions of all senior bureaucrats in the public service, public sector, scientific fields and others.



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