Keeping kids safe online in the library

The internet is an incredible tool. It provides an opportunity to communicate, learn, play, and be entertained by content from around the world. It's vibrant, incredibly varied, and offers information on any topic at a click of the mouse.

While the internet provides many positives for adults and children alike, there are risks. Cyberbullying, unwanted contact, identity theft, scams, and exposure to adult content can make the internet a risky place for children. And the risks exist for all children—from pre-schoolers only starting to use a computer to the experienced 'digital native' teens.

Promoting a safe online environment is an important consideration for libraries. Many school-aged children use the public access terminals to research their school assignments as well as for entertainment and to communicate with friends.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), as part of the Australian Government's commitment to cybersafety, manages a national cybersafety program. This program includes targeted education and awareness activities and resources for parents and children, and cybersafety education resources for libraries and teachers. ACMA also conducts research into current trends in cybersafety and young people's use of the internet.

Recent ACMA and worldwide studies outlined in this article highlight how young Australians increasingly live online lives and need guidance and support from informed adults to navigate their online experiences.

Online behaviour and risks

Recent studies into children and young people's online behaviour indicate that they undertake a wide range of activities—from using the internet for research to a large number of social, gaming, and learning activities. ACMA research on young people's online participation reflects worldwide trends, highlighting their engagement with web 2.0 user-generated content websites such as YouTube and Flickr, and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook[1].

This research identified important points including:

- Over 40 per cent of children and young people have some of their own material on the internet and 33 per cent have a page on a social networking site.

- From age 14 onwards, 70 per cent or more of teenagers are engaged in some form of web authorship.

- Among 16–17-year-olds, 66 per cent have an online profile on a website such as MySpace, 40 per cent have posted their own photographs or artwork on the web, and 17 per cent have their own blog.

Children and young people are clearly entrenched in an online world. But how risky is it? According to research by the European Commission, children feel informed and aware of online risks. However, while they could identify many of the risks and knew some appropriate ways to deal with them, they still reported "indulg(ing) in risky behaviours … to have been victims of bullying … or know other children to whom (bullying) has happened."[2]

The UK's Byron Review[3] also noted that while children are not reporting having major concerns regarding their online behaviour—seemingly feeling informed and in control about online risks—children and young people are still "developing critical skills and need (adult) help to make wise decisions."[4]

Report author, Dr Tanya Byron, notes that recent data shows young people are at an increasing risk of "exposure to sexually inappropriate content, contributions to negative beliefs and attitudes, cyberbullying and (content which promotes) harmful behaviours." The review recommends, among other things, "a strong commitment to changing behaviour through a sustained information and education strategy."

A library professional's role

Library professionals have an important role to play in helping to educate children about online safety.

Most public libraries have steps in place, including internet-use policies, which cover the terms and conditions for use of library internet use, including guidelines for children. There are other opportunities which can further this role.

Library staff can help by providing information on safe searching techniques and trusted websites. Libraries can also make information available on how to deal with online risks, such as cyberbullying, privacy issues, content complaints, or how to get in touch with support services.

To assist library staff, ACMA, in conjunction with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), has produced a range of resources that aims to complement existing policies in libraries and provides additional support to library staff.

The *Cybersmart Guide for Library Staff* provides library staff with the information, support, and tools to effectively promote internet safety in Australian school and public libraries—especially for children. The guide is complemented by information for families, the *Cybersmart Guide for Families* and the cyber rules poster for young internet users.

A series of online cybersafety videos have also been developed for library staff, covering internet basics and how to deal with the range of online safety issues.

Library materials are available at **http://www.cybersmart.gov.au**.

Further internet safety advice and information is available from the Cybersafety Contact Centre on 1800 880 176.

Smart choices

The internet is a truly incredible tool and we can only anticipate that its popularity will increase, leading to many more, and varied, opportunities and risks for users.

Helping children have positive online experiences requires sound support and education – not only by library staff but also by teachers, parents, and carers. With this, children will be better able to make good decisions when they experience confronting material or behaviours online.

Help children make smart choices and keep safe online.

Sharon Trotter
Manager, Cybersafety Programs
on behalf of the Cybersafety Programs
Section, ACMA
cybersafety@acma.gov.au

1. ACMA, 2007. *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007*. Available at: http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib101058/maciaf2007_overview_final.doc

2. European Commission, Directorate-General Information Society and Media. *2007 Safer Internet for Children: Qualitative Study in 29 European Countries*. Available at : http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/docs/eurobarometer/qualitative_study_2007/summary_report_en.pdf

3. Byron, T. 2008. *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review. Department for Children, Schools and Families*. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/Final%20Report%20Bookmarked.pdf

4. Byron, T. 2008. *Byron Review: Children and New Technology*. Department for Children, Schools and Families. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/Final%20Report%20Bookmarked.pdf