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Making the Net safe for kids

Parents, libraries among those taking responsibility for screening content

By Ilene Leichuk
STAFF WRITER

Gina and Norman Lee followed all the rules and they still ended up with sex ads and recipes for bombs.

The Redondo Beach parents thought they had child-proofed their Internet connection by prohibiting their 15-year-old son from surfing the World Wide Web during certain hours and by making computer time a family activity.

But then they went online to read about the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Mars project a few weeks ago, incorrectly typed three letters in NASA's address and found sex ads instead.

"It's a lot more convenient nowadays (to access offensive material) than it was," said Gina Lee, who recently began teaching an Internet safety workshop at a community computer center in Rancho Palos Verdes.

Several South Bay residents like Lee have decided to take Internet safety into their own hands since the Supreme Court this summer ruled that banning offensive images and language from the Internet is unconstitutional.

Libraries with public computer labs are requiring parents to sign no-obscenity policies.

Employees at a local cybercafe, where you can surf the Internet while sipping a latte, are monitoring which World Wide Web sites young users browse and shutting them out of objectionable sites from a staff computer.

And colleges are asking students to promise not to swear in e-mail.

Interest in Internet safety has surged in the past 16 months, said Wendy Simpson, president of SafeSurf, a public interest group that created the first Web-site rating system.

She attributed the interest to the popularity of computers as Christmas gifts.

"I think the broad-based family market is finally getting online," Simpson said.

With 4 million children online in 1996 and 20.2 million children expected online by the year 2002, the best safeguard against objectionable material is parental education, according to computer experts and recent statements by President Clinton.

Lee, a computer consultant, tells the handful of parents and grandparents in her small monthly class at Palos Verdes not to fear the Internet, despite headlines about online child pornography and little girls who run away with their older online boyfriends.

Internet safeguards for children

■ **Common sense:** Get involved with your child's Internet experience. Make computer time a family activity.

■ **All computers with Internet access keep a log of sites visited.** If you use Windows 95, check your Internet connection program file (ie. Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer) in your hard drive. The log will be in your cache, cookies or history files.

■ **Buy software that polices your computer for you.** Average cost is \$50. There are four types of filters:

Blockers: Prohibit your computer from accessing sites deemed by watchdog groups as inappropriate for children. Examples: CyberSitter, Cyberpatrol, InterGo, Surfwatch, NetNanny.

Enablers: Allow your children to visit only certain, pre-approved sites. Examples: NewView, NetNanny.

Time blockers: Work like alarm clocks for computers. The programs allow Internet access only at certain times and durations determined by parents. Examples: Cyberpatrol, Times Up, CyberSitter, NetNanny.

Logs: Build a list of Internet sites visited on your computer. Examples: Cyberpatrol, NetNanny.



Chat about it

For more information about safeguards or to talk with other concerned parents, try these Internet addresses:

■ SafeSurf has compiled comprehensive information about software, laws and parent support groups. SafeSurf operated the first world wide web rating system, www.safesurf.com

■ Also try www.vtw.org

■ Platform for Internet Content, www.w3.org/pub/www/pics

■ CNET Inc. is developing a ratings system and comparative product reviews, www.cnet.com

■ Voters Telecommunication Watch also does product research, www.vtw.org

Source: PV on the Net

Internet

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"My sister-in-law was reluctant to have the Internet because of all this," said student Marilyn Litvak, 57, of Palos Verdes Estates. "I think that is just stupid."

Lee said that with a little work parents can make the Internet suitable for their children.

Her tools: parent involvement, learning your computer's history and buying new software.

"The most effective way to keep teens from viewing something they shouldn't is to involve their parents," Lee said.

Lee recommends parents surf the Internet with their children. If they cannot be there, they can at least check up on their children's Internet activity by learning to read their computer's history log.

The more expensive safeguard is software that filters out Web sites with offensive words and images for you. The first widely distributed filter, SafeSurf, hit the market in 1995. Now a variety of programs are on the market and cost about \$50 each.

Public agencies are testing several approaches to monitor their computers.

Many elementary schools are using filters as school bonds and government grants bring more computers into the classroom. Local libraries, colleges and private businesses generally believe filters can be too restrictive, however.

Russ Arnett, Marymount College computing services director, said his school ruled out filters to avoid free-

dom-of-speech debates. Instead, Marymount asks its students to sign a policy in which they promise to use only appropriate language and stay away from obscene Web sites.

"We tell them no privacy can be expected in the e-mail," Arnett said.

So far, no one has complained.

Ted Vegvari, founder of Palos Verdes on the Net community computer center, also did not to install filter software.

"We decided not to fix the problem until it existed," Vegvari said.

County libraries require that minors present signed parental permission before they log on. Redondo Beach and Palos Verdes Peninsula libraries require that children under age 9 are accompanied by an adult.

At Espresso Biega cybercafe in Rolling Hills Estates, owner Vesta Biega set up an employee computer that her staff can use if it needs to monitor where young customers are surfing.

They've only had to use it once since it opened almost two years ago, she said.

"We saw some pictures pop up, we zapped them off, and that was it," Biega said.

Filters and supervision cannot catch everything — there are thousands of new Web sites created daily — Biega and others warned. But they also said shutting the computer off is not their answer.

"I tell concerned parents that they are missing out on a lot," Vegvari said. "It's like not letting your kids have books at this point. It's like not letting them walk into the library."



BRUCE HAZELTON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Norman Lee, right, and his son Jonathan, 15, work on a World Wide Web page on their home computer in Redondo Beach.