Embrace Civility in the Digital Age ~ Issue Brief

Public Libraries
Internet Safety in a Web 2.0 World

Swimming pools can be dangerous for children. To protect them, one can install locks, put up fences, and deploy pool alarms. All of these measures are helpful, but by far most important thing that one can do for one's children is to teach them to swim.[1]

Public Libraries & Internet Safety

When the Internet first came into public libraries, fears related to access of pornography led Congress to pass the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA). The objective of CIPA was to protect children online by requiring the installation of filtering software by any public library that received E-Rate funds.

Public librarians wisely objected to reliance on this "technology quick fix," instead promoting reliance on policies and education. The American Library Association's law suit against CIPA resulted in a decision that provided an easy way to address concerns of adult access to protected material.

Regardless of how public libraries have responded to the CIPA filtering requirements related to youth access, public libraries play an important role in protecting young people by helping them and their parents learn how to make good choices. The following are three key messages from Libraries & the Internet Toolkit, a 2003 publication of the ALA:

- Librarians care deeply about children.
- The only lifelong Internet protection for children is to teach them to use the Internet properly and to teach them to be information literate, so they can make informed choices.
- Parents need education, too, for themselves and their children.[2]

Most public libraries have been proactive in providing Internet safety information for children, teens, and parents on their web site, along to links to other resources. Some also provide workshops for parents.

Internet Safety in a Web 2.0 World

The concerns related to youth use of digital technologies have changed from the original concern of inappropriate access to a wider range of concerns associated with use of interactive media. These concerns include digital aggression (cyberbullying), interacting with a range of people, and risks associated with posting information that could damage their reputation and opportunities, or could damage others.

Research has demonstrated that the majority of young people make positive choices online, effectively respond to the negative situations that do occur, and are not overly distressed by these situations. They may, however, make mistakes that could be prevented through better education, including informal education through the public library.

A minority of young people face greater risks that must be addressed through effective prevention and intervention. The availability of online resources and services for young people who are at risk and their parents presents a new opportunity for public libraries to provide services to support the health and well-being of the young people in the communities they serve.

This Issue Brief will outline strategies that public libraries can use to help young people and their parents embrace safety and civility in a Web 2.0 World. Two strategies are recommended:

- Implement a social norms-based "sound-bite tips" approach for informal education of parents, children, and teens.
- Provide easy access to online resources to support the safety and well-being of young people.

Actively Involved Parents

Research has consistently demonstrated that when parents are actively and positively involved in their children's lives, those children make better choices online. Public libraries have many resources for parents on effective parenting.

To increase parent awareness of what they can do to help keep their child safe and support their teen in gaining good values and effective skills when using digital technologies, public libraries can supplement their online information resources by providing catchy "sound-bite tips" on digital age parenting strategies.[3] The development of interactive parent-child learning activities, at appropriate developmental levels could also be considered. These activities could reinforce parent-child communications about these issues.

Cyber Safe Kids

Parents must be responsible for ensuring that children are safe online by setting up an electronically fenced "play yard" to guide their children to safe sites and ensure safe communications. Beyond this, kids should understand simple safety guidelines. These guidelines can be provided to children in "sound-bite tip" posters or log -on screens when they use library computers or web site.

- *Keep Yourself Safe*. Stay on the kid's sites that are safe and fun.
- *Keep Your Life in Balance*. Keep the time you spend online in balance with other fun activities.
- *Think Before You Post*. Post material that shows people you make good choices. Never post your address or phone number.
- *Connect Safely*. Communicate only with friends through email or personal messaging. Communicate with strangers only on safe kid's sites.
- *Stay Out of the Garbage*. If "yucky" stuff appears on your computer, turn off the screen and tell an adult.
- Spot the Ads. Make sure you can tell the difference between fun activities and ads for kid's stuff.
- *Be Kind Online*. Treat others kindly online. If you receive a hurtful message, ask for help from an adult to respond.

Cyber Savvy Teens

Nancy Willard's new book, *Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility* (Corwin Press, 2011) provides comprehensive insight to ensure teens become Cyber Savvy. The book is primarily directed towards educators, but insight from the book can also be used by public librarians to support informal educational activities for teens. Cyber Savvy teens:

- *Keep Themselves Safe*. They understand the risks-and they know how to avoid getting into risky situations, to detect whether they are at risk, and to effectively respond.
- *Present a Positive Image*. They present themselves online as someone who make positive choices.
- *Respect Others*. They respect the rights, privacy, and property of others and treat others with civility.
- *Take Responsibility for the Well-being of Others*. They help others and report serious concerns to a responsible adult.

Positive Norms, Effective Skills & Helpful Allies

The Cyber Savvy approach focuses on three key components:

- *Reinforce Positive Norms.* Informal education can promote the positive norms held by the majority of the teens. Local surveys are recommended to obtain insight into the norms held by local youth. Surveys are available on the Embracing Digital Youth web site at http://embracingdigitalyouth.org. Public libraries can use these surveys to obtain data from local teens through their library web site.

- *Strengthen Effective Skills.* Informal messaging can help young people gain skills by sharing information about the effective strategies used by their peers. In a library setting, it is important that this messaging be catchy "sound-bite tips." Posters, bookmarks, and log-in screens can be used.

- *Encourage Helpful Allies.* As helpful allies, young people can provide support to a peer who is at risk or being harmed, challenge irresponsible or hurtful behavior, and report unresolved or serious concerns. Informal education can focus on the important role of "friends" in preventing harm.

Cyber Savvy

The following are the key issues addressed in *Cyber Savvy:*

- *Avoid the Impulse. Remember, What You Do Reflects On You.* Engage in effective problem solving and positive decision making before posting or sending anything digitally. Be a helpful ally if you see someone is at risk or is being harmed.

- *Read With Your Eyes Open. Assess the Credibility of Information and Trustworthiness of People.* Carefully assess the credibility of information and the trustworthiness of people by considering issues such as importance, method of contact, possible bias, consistency, evidence of efforts to influence attitudes, substance, and by asking the opinion of others.

- *Keep Your Life in Balance. Avoid Addictive Use of Digital Technologies.* Ensure your use of digital technologies does not interfere with other activities that make your life happy and successful.

- *Think Before You Post. Protect Your Reputation and Respect Others.* Recognize that whenever you post or send material in digitally it can be widely distributed and affect your reputation —positively or negatively. Respect the rights and privacy of others.

- *Connect Safely. Interact Safely With Others Online.* Be careful when you interact with people online. Only let people you know, or those whom your good friends know, have access to your personal profile. If you want to meet in person with someone you have gotten to know online, make a safe meeting plan and bring along friends.

- *Keep Yourself Secure. Implement Security and Avoid Scams.* Ensure your computer security is maintained and your activities do not increase your risk. Watch out for scams—offers that are too good to be true or threaten loss if you do not share personal information.

- *Abide by the Terms. Act in Accord with Policies, Terms, and Laws.* Follow the common standards to protect the rights of everyone.

- *Stay Out of the Garbage. Avoid Objectionable and Illegal Material.* Use safe surfing techniques to avoid accidentally accessing garbage. Know how to effectively respond if such material is accidentally accessed. Don't access or distribute child pornography.

- *Don't Sell Yourself. Disclose and Consume Wisely.* Make a personal decision about how much personal information you want to share with sites and apps. Use the Internet to research companies, products, and services prior to making purchases.

- *Protect Your Face and Friends. Be Savvy and Civil When Networking.* Protect your privacy by limiting access to your profile only to those you have friended. Protect your reputation and respect others when you post. Friend only people whom you or a trusted friend know in person. Report abuse.

- *Embrace Civility. Prevent Hurtful Digital Communications.* Exercise care when posting or sending material so you do not place yourself at risk of attack. If someone is hurting you, wait until you have calmed down to respond. Save the evidence. Then calmly tell the person to stop, ignore or block the communications, or file an abuse report—or all three. If the person does not stop, ask for help. Recognize that no one deserves to be attacked online. If you hurt others, this will damage your reputation and friendships. If you see someone being harmed, provide support to that person and speak up against the harm. If the situation is serious or continues, report to a responsible adult.

- *Cyberdate Safely. Avoid Exploitation and Abusive Relationships.* Proceed with caution when forming a relationship through digital communications—watch out for fantasy relationships. Don't let someone exploit you—if someone appears to be trying to manipulate you to engage in sexual activities or requests a nude photo, discontinue contact and report this to an adult. Do not allow a partner to control and abuse you using digital technologies.

Youth at Higher Risk

As noted above, a minority of teens are at greater risk online— those who are also at greater risk generally. As a recognized "safe place" for young people in the community, public libraries are a place where teens who are at greater risk may engage in more extensive, unsupervised use of the Internet. This could lead to risky situations. The social norms/effective skills messaging ground in peer-insight should be helpful in communicating to these teens. But public libraries can also provide additional helpful resources.

- Many national, state, and local social support organizations have created excellent information and support sites for "at risk" teens and young adults.[4] Many sites provide a helpful information on risk issues. Some provide crisis counseling. Others offer online social environments for teens who face challenges, such as being in foster care or having a minority sexual orientation.

An excellent service that could be provided by public libraries is a specific page on the library web site that provides links to high quality safety, health, and well-being sites for teens and young adults. It is recommended that public librarians consult with local youth risk prevention professionals in the development of these online resources. The library can also work with local schools to encourage them to link to the resource through school web sites.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age (a program of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use) promotes approaches that will best ensure all young people become cyber savvy and that seek to address youth risk in the digital age in a positive and restorative manner. Web site: http://embracecivility.org E-mail: info@embracecivility.org

1 Thornbourgh, D., & Lin, H. S. (Eds.) (2002). Youth, pornography and the Internet. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Retrieved June 22, 2011, from http://www.nap.edu/openbook .php?isbn=0309082749

2 http://http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/iftoolkits/litoolkit/default.cfm

3 Embracing Digital Youth has produced a separate Issue Brief that provides recommendations for parenting of digital youth.

4 Some examples of key national sites include: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)--crisis support for suicide prevention. TrevorProject (http://www.thetrevorproject.org/) and ItGetsbetter (http://www.itgetsbetter.org/)--crisis support for those with a minority sexual orientation or identity. A Thin Line (www.athinline.org/) and Love is Respect (http://http://www.loveisrespect.org/)--sites that provide information and support related to dating violence. Foster Club (http://www.fosterclub.com/)--social networking site for youth in foster care. TrevorSpace (http://www.trevorspace.org/)--social networking site for LGBT youth and their allies.