To Filter or Not: The Pros and Cons of Using Parental Control Software | American Association of School Librarians (AASL)

To Filter or Not: The Pros and Cons of Using Parental Control Software

Besides setting guidelines for use of the Internet, there is one more action for families to consider in their quest for child safety on the Internet- installing parental control or filtering software to limit exposure to adult materials which may be considered pornographic or harmful to children. The software can be installed on a personal home computer, or some Internet service providers offer filtering as an option.

Parental control software, such as CyberPatrol, Net Nanny, and GuardiaNet, is designed to restrict Internet access in several ways. First, the software will block access to web sites with content deemed inappropriate for children by the software company. Most software will also filter and restrict access to web pages based on key words such as "sex." Each company's software works from a unique and highly guarded database of blocked sites and key words which are based on company selected criteria of what constitutes inappropriate materials. General categories for blocking websites often include text and/or photos of an adult sexual nature, drugs and drug culture, violence and hate, racism and intolerance, gambling, tobacco, alcohol, and cruelty to animals. Adult users can select some or all of the categories to activate blocking of sites on those topics.

Most parental control software programs include other types of options allowing users to customize Internet access to fit family needs and circumstances. For example, the software may allow parents to set the time of day or number of hours per week the Internet will be available to children. Adults can also expand or subtract the list of blocked sites. Some programs allow parents to create different levels of Internet access based on the varying ages of children in the family.
Some programs allow parents to create different levels of Internet access based on the varying ages of children in the family. Some programs report the addresses of websites children have visited and restrict the sending of personal information such as name, address, and telephone number, known as "outgoing filtering." With yet other programs, local applications, such as games, can also be restricted. Settings are password protected.

There are various ways in which software can be purchased, and it is important to remember that new sites with the potential for inappropriate material are being added to the Internet each day. Some parent control programs can be obtained with a single purchase ranging from forty to fifty dollars and updating of blocked sites is included in the initial fee. Others are purchased with an annual subscription of around fifty dollars for the first year and approximately thirty dollars for the renewal. Parental control software purchased on a subscription basis includes updating of blocked sites with a frequency ranging from daily to monthly. Trial versions of parental control software can be downloaded (brought through the telephone line to your computer's hard drive) from the companies' web sites on the Internet and used for a short period of time to allow families to review features and see which will fit their needs.

Installing parental control software is a personal, family decision, and there are several important points to understand. It is critical to recognize that filtering software cannot guarantee that children or other family members will never see inappropriate material on the Internet. While blocking pornography and explicit adult sexual material, the software may also block access to useful information related to personal health issues and other topics. NO program is one hundred percent effective, and new sites are added to the Internet daily. Most of all, it is essential to realize that parental control software is not a substitute for active parent interaction with your children and supervision of their Internet use.
There is intense debate across the country relating to the use of filtering software programs in libraries and schools. One side feels children should not be exposed to pornography and other adult material found on the Internet and support filtering. For example, the website, Filtering Facts (http://www.filteringfacts.org) promotes use of filtering software in libraries. Those on the other side of the debate, including the American Library Association and its Office of Intellectual Freedom, want to protect the First Amendment rights of children on the Internet. Legislation has been introduced at the national level and in many state legislatures to require the use of filtering software to block access to information or sites on the Internet deemed inappropriate for minors.

If you are interested in parental control software and the issues surrounding it, visit the following sites or enter the terms "filtering software" or "parental control software" into your favourite search engine: FamilyGuide Book. Because It's a Jungle Out There www.familyguidebook.com/charts.html Parry Aftab, parent, lawyer, author, and Executive Director of CyberAngels, has one of the largest online safety sites on the Internet. It includes a "Summary of Features of Filtering Software" chart with software costs.

GetNetWise www.getnetwise.org A resource "to help kids have safe, educational, and entertaining online experiences," the site has a lengthy list of tools for filtering explicit content, to monitor a minor's access, or limit time online. Enter the type of content you are concerned with (i.e. sex, hate, violence, etc.), the type of technology (i.e., www, email, FTP), and the type of operating system of your computer, and a possible list of matching parental control software products will be listed with links.