

## **Filtering software: Better, but still fallible**

Internet filtering software, which inserts itself between your computer's browser and Internet connection to prevent objectionable sites from getting through, is better at blocking pornography than in recent years, our new tests show.

But our evaluation of 11 products, including the filters built into online services AOL and MSN, found that the software isn't very effective at blocking sites promoting hatred, illegal drugs, or violence. As we found in our tests in 2001, the best blockers today tended to block many sites they shouldn't.

Filtering software is more important to parents now than it was a few years ago. According to a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, almost 19 million American children between the ages of 12 and 17 can access the Internet at home. Besides the many pornographic sites, there are now more than 5,000 hate-promoting sites, up 25 percent from last year, according to the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

The technology that consumers most often use to protect children at home is filtering software. As a result of a federal law passed in 2000, such software is used in many public schools and libraries.

The type of filtering software we tested is also at the center of a national debate on regulating Web sites. In June 2004, the Supreme Court upheld a ban on enforcing the Child Online Protection Act (COPA), sending the case back to the Philadelphia Circuit Court. At issue is whether filters that consumers can use at home are a less restrictive alternative to COPA, which in part would require Web sites that contain "material harmful to minors" to use an age verification system to make sure site visitors are 18 or older. A trial is expected later this year.

### **HOW WE TESTED**

All filtering software products we tested--including the online services--intercept all attempts to visit Web sites, then consult a list of sites that the software maker has deemed unsuitable for children. Some products can sniff out objectionable material on the fly. Depending on the product, children trying to access an off-limits site may instead be greeted with a pop-up stop sign or a blank screen. Parents can override blocks.

For our tests, we built a list of objectionable sites that anyone can easily find, plus informational sites to test the filters' ability to discern the objectionable from the merely sensitive. We configured each filter as it would be configured by the parent of a 12- to 15-year-old, then tried to access the sites. Here's what we found:

Filters keep most, but not all, porn out. All of the products tested were very good or excellent at blocking pornography. AOL, KidsNet, and MSN blocked practically every such site in our test. The worst performer blocked 88 percent, enough to serve as an obstacle, but not impervious to a persistent teen.

They block more than porn, but not effectively. The filters had a tough time blocking hate sites and those advocating illegal drug use, violence, and weapons-making. For example, nine products (all except AOL and KidsNet) failed to block a site with detailed instructions on how to kill someone with your bare hands.

Informative sites are snubbed, too. The best porn blockers were heavy-handed against sites about health issues, sex education, civil rights, and politics. For example, seven products blocked KeepAndBearArms.com, a site advocating gun owners' rights. Most unwarranted blocking occurred with sites featuring sex education or gender-related issues. Some drug-education sites were blocked. For example, four products blocked the National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the federal government's National Institutes of Health. KidsNet interfered the most with useful sites, blocking 73 percent. All programs except CyberSitter show you why a specific site was blocked and all let adults override the block.

Research can be a headache. These programs may impede older children doing research for school reports. Seven block the entire results page of a Google or Yahoo search if some links have objectionable words in them. AOL, KidsNet, Norton Internet Security, and Safe Eyes allow searches to be completed by displaying the entire results page or blocking only offending words.

They regulate more than Web sites. These filters can prevent downloading of MP3 music and similar potentially illegal activities, disable games and other programs, and screen instant messages or e-mail messages for inappropriate language. They can also block children from divulging personal information, such as names and addresses. We didn't fully test those features, but based on our experience, we expect some to allow information that's slightly edited to get through. Most products can set up online time limits and keep logs of online activities, sometimes down to the last keystroke.

## HOW TO CHOOSE

Whichever filter you choose, give your child clear directions on how, when, and where they can access the Internet. Here's how to get the most from filters:

**Consider your Internet provider.** Filtering comes free with AOL, Earthlink, or MSN. AOL and MSN both filtered effectively, but AOL blocked sites such as NewsMax, a conservative political site, and Operation Truth, an advocacy site for Iraq War veterans. In both cases, a parent can override the block.

**Weigh protection vs. interference.** All filtering programs either overblock or underblock. The Quick Picks can help you choose one that best meets your needs. For young children, look for maximum protection. For older children, look for filtering software that doesn't overly interfere.

**Consider which activities to control.** Older children are more likely to engage in activities such as e-mail, instant messaging, and gaming. Time-management controls help minimize fighting for the computer. The [Ratings](#) tell you which products offer these features.

**Decide how much customization you need.** If your children aren't close in age, consider a program that can be customized by age. Those that offer more filtering flexibility, as noted in the Ratings, make fine-tuning easier but may not offer the best protection.

