



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The ELS [Early Literacy Station] is not just another computer with software. Kids are captivated by the interface and start to explore immediately.”

-From the AWE website
(www.awe-libraries.com)

An Albany parent recently suggested I write a column about the Internet and children. When I asked him what he had in mind, he briefly talked about the computers in the children’s section of the library. He included the new AWE Early Literacy Station, which provides educational games. It isn’t connected to the Internet but seems to hold the same fascination for children as the Internet ones.

This is a challenging topic. There are several reasons libraries provide Internet access and educational software for children - the best one being that not everyone can afford to have them at home. In addition, computers can provide information, just as books, CDs, videos, DVDs and magazines do. And finally, by offering computers and Internet access we are continuing our ongoing efforts to stay relevant and attractive to those who live in our communities.

However, when someone asks me about the comput-

ers in the children’s section in my library, I won’t say I wish they weren’t there, because I don’t. But I would say I’d rather they weren’t near the children’s books. In theory, they attract children who will then notice all the wonderful other materials we have to offer. But in practice this doesn’t happen much. They do make the library an appealing place to be, which is always good and I’m glad of that.

They can detract, though, from the atmosphere of exploration and quiet pleasure that a welcoming children’s section can offer. The AWE station, in particular, has proven to pull young children from their usual interest in books and hold them entranced for as long as they are permitted to either use it or watch someone else using it. I have seen examples of this over and over. While some children aren’t attracted to the station, and others can use it and be done, there are those who are mesmerized and vocally resist being pulled away by frustrated

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parents.

Consequently, I have had many worried comments from parents about the impact this computer has had on their regular visits to the library. One parent even emailed me, saying she probably wouldn't be bringing her child as often because of it.

On the other hand, there are adults who love the Literacy Station. They sit contentedly side-by-side with their child, discovering how to use the miniature mouse and how to find a program that is just right. These parents thank me.

So, I am torn by these remarks. I stand by the need to have something like this station, whether it is this particular one or not. And the concerned adults have almost uniformly mentioned they understand the need for it in a public library. They aren't asking for it to be removed, they are simply sorry to see the effect it is having on their children.

I am sympathetic to these parents and when I can, I offer support. I have posted a sign, limiting each child to one 15-minute session per day. Although this sign is usually ignored, it can be helpful for parents when they are ready for their child to move on. I offer to show the child the picture book section or the toys. I commiserate with the adults and chat with the child.

Over all, though, I remain clear this issue is a small example of the ongoing challenge public libraries face as we try to stay firmly in the present. As we offer the newest as well as the established, we are all adjusting to what that means to our children's areas and our libraries.