

# HOMework AND THE INTERNET

We've all probably had a laugh at the expense of the dad in the "Great Wall of China" broadband ad — "Too many rabbits in China" — which makes a great case for using the Internet for researching school assignments. The Internet is a fantastic tool for finding out all kinds of information but there are pitfalls that parents need to help guide children around when searching online.

**By Judith Ridge**



**T**oday's children have never known life without the Internet and are accustomed to having a world of information at their fingertips, free of charge. But it is easy to forget that information on the Internet is not always reliable or accurate, and isn't necessarily available to be copied for school assignments.

For example, a few years ago students were using an apparently professional and legitimate website about human rights activist Martin Luther King. But the website was in fact published by an organisation whose intention was to damage Dr King's reputation by reporting malicious gossip and rumours about his private life. The website no longer exists, but while it did the potential for wrong information to be included in assignments was high.

**So how then do we help our kids work out whether a website contains accurate information that is written by someone who knows what they're talking about and has no ulterior motives?**

There are a few simple ways of checking out whether or not a website is the real deal:

1. Find out who wrote the information on the site and check their qualifications. A reliable website should include details of the people behind it – if you can't find this information relatively easily, then proceed with caution.
2. Determine how old the information is, and how often it is updated. Many sites include a line at the bottom of the main page to say this. If the information is more than a few years old you may be better off searching for a more up-to-date site.
3. Look for bias contained in the information. Some websites might appear to be neutral in their tone, but if you dig a little deeper you may find that they are sponsored or even created by a company with a vested interest.

It's important to encourage your child to find multiple sources of information when researching, including using traditional sources such as encyclopaedias and reference books.

And don't forget your local library. Public libraries across NSW have access to a wide range of online research material and librarians are always happy to help guide students to find the best, most accurate information available from any source.

It's also important for your child to understand that just because something can be read for free on the Internet doesn't mean

they can simply copy it. Doing so without acknowledging the source is plagiarism and is not permitted. If they quote a book or website, they must always note where they got the information from.

Some material on the Internet may be covered by copyright laws. For example, there are thousands of websites that publish song lyrics but many of them are breaking copyright laws by publishing those lyrics without permission or paying royalties to the writer. The same may be true of poetry or short stories, or even non-fiction material. Look out for the copyright symbol (©) on

websites, but even if there isn't one stick to the golden rule – if you quote it, acknowledge it!

Finally, you will be reassured to know that when your child is using the Internet for research in their school library or computer lab, you don't need to worry that they may stumble across inappropriate content. The NSW Department of Education and Training has filters or "net nannies" in place right across the NSW public school Internet network that safeguard your child from accidentally accessing obscene or otherwise unsuitable websites. ■

