



Chat room monitors keep watchful eye on cyber kids

By Michael Weiss, Cox News Service

Two preteens were in the midst of a lovers' quarrel. Another bragged about her appearance in an attempt to attract boys. And one kid interrupted everybody's conversations to find out if anyone else listened to a rock band called the Foo Fighters.

In the middle of it all, Pete Salomon tried to keep order.

"It's like chaperoning a seventh-grade class," he said, frantically typing on the keyboard in his Atlanta home. "You're basically screaming over everybody else."

The chaotic atmosphere is just a typical Saturday night in the Cartoon Studio, the Cartoon Network's computer "chat room" for children on America Online. And it's just another night on the job for Mr. Salomon, 28, who monitors the room for obscene language, rude insults and other violations of online etiquette.

"Chat rooms" are sites on the Internet and online services where people with similar interests have conversations via their computers. The rooms have become enormously popular among children.

But concerns about the safety of the rooms have emerged as pedophiles have been caught posing as children, and as obscene images have popped up in kids' areas.

Online services are taking extra measures to try to make sure that predators aren't entering the kids' chat rooms and that conversations and images are appropriate for young eyes and ears.

"Kids are very cyber-savvy, in many cases more so than their parents," said AOL spokeswoman Judy Tashbook. "We do everything we can to answer parents' concerns."

AOL keeps things under control with its Terms of Service, a list of rules that govern online conduct, enforced by "guides" who cruise kids' areas and have the power to eject troublemakers for anything from vulgar language to posting chain letters.

CompuServe recently unveiled Wow!, a service for families that will allow parents to control what their child sees online, including the ability to screen kids' e-mail.

On Prodigy, adults monitor kids' chat rooms but mostly react to problems after they happen, said spokeswoman Carol Wallace. "They're there in the role of a bouncer, not a babysitter," she said.

The Cartoon Network decided a year ago to recruit 40 computer users to serve as online hosts in its chat room, keeping it under adult supervision every minute it's open.

"For us it was an absolute necessity," said Catherine Smith, the Cartoon Network's online producer. "We don't want parents dropping into the chat room and see a lot of cursing or obscene language."

The hosts are trained to recognize potential trouble -- they learn to spot adults lurking in kids' rooms by watching for people who first say they are one age then change to another -- and to respond quickly if someone in the room is disrupting the conversation. Hosts cannot eject a member, but they can summon a guide to do it for them.

The hosts also greet newcomers to the room, dispense technical advice and keep the conversation moving.

One recent Saturday night, Mr. Salomon spent most of his time asking kids to stop polling -- asking others in the room to press a number if they like a particular rock band -- which is banned in chat rooms because it's a conversation-stopper.

In most cases, he gently admonishes violators with the text equivalent of a parents' sideways glance, something like: "Chris . . ." A few times, though, he forwarded transcripts of the offenses to an AOL guide.
