**Database searching tools**

**Search terms**: Most databases allow you to search for a specific term in different parts of the citation entry. For example, in the title, abstract, list of keywords or author names. Unless you are searching for a specific paper or papers by a single author, it is better to select the option that will search for your term in the whole entry to avoid missing a key paper. This is usually the default setting. When selecting a search term think about the spelling – the same word can be spelt differently in English and American (e.g. paediatric/pediatric or oestrogen/estrogen) and you will need to search with both spellings to make sure you access the whole range of literature in that area.

**Truncation**: Some words will have the same ‘trunk’ but a different ending or beginning. Using a truncation mark will allow you to search for a number of related terms at the same time, making your search more efficient. Most databases use either an asterisk (\*) or a dollar sign ($) – you may need to use both when you start searching to work out which one that database uses. For example, nurs\* will retrieve citations that include the words nurse, nurses, nursing, nursed; ostom\* will retrieve citations that include the words ostomy, ostomist, ostomate.

**Boolean operators**: This tool allows you to combine searches or search terms with AND, OR or NOT to achieve a specific search outcome. Depending on the term you select, you could explode your search or limit your search so it is important to select the right term at the right point in the search. See table 3.4 for examples of use.

**Subject headings**: Some databases use subject headings to classify citations. These can be useful if the term you use does not identify many citations as you can search for the subject heading and identify any other terms used on that database that may produce better results. You can either search for them individually or click on the heading or sub-heading to view the citations listed. MEDLINE uses MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) indexing with a hierarchy system of trees and branches, subheadings and the ability to ‘explode’ a term.

**Search limit/edit**: Gives the option to refine your search. For example by choosing only papers that have been published in peer-reviewed journals, those to do with children, papers published in the last ten years or those in English etc. This can be helpful if your original search identifies more citations than it is practical to hand-search.

**Save your search**: Once you have identified potential papers in a number that is feasible to hand-search (view each citation in turn), you have the option of marking the citations that might be useful. This might be as simple as ticking a box next to the citation or selecting the ‘add to folder’ option. When you have finished searching, you can go to the ‘folder’ tab (or equivalent) to view the citations you have marked for more detailed appraisal. There is the option to create an account on many databases, in which case the marked citations will be saved when you log out. Otherwise you can export them by email, send to a reference management system or simply print them off or write them down so you have a hard copy.

Search history: This function is essential to undertaking meaningful literature searches. It allows you to view all the searches you have undertaken and combine with AND, OR or NOT to explode and then refine your search. See table 3.4 for an example of this.