

Virtual Worlds and Online Games: Digital Identity Tips

Common Sense Media,
Fri May 17, 3:04 PM UTC

Developing good social skills is crucial to a positive online experience. Help your kids learn the basics.

What are online worlds for young kids?

Club Penguin, Webkinz, Neopets, and other online playgrounds are targeted to kids ages 6-8. They're called virtual worlds, because they create entirely new and different environments for your children.

Typically, your children will create an avatar (a cartoon character of themselves), which they can dress up and play with in the game. Then they create their own "room," which they can decorate and where they store all of the items they win or buy with virtual money.

Most online worlds have mini-games and "hangouts" where kids can use their imaginations, test their skills, and interact with others. They chat with other players using pre-scripted phrases, and can compete against other players' game scores. Most online worlds have rules regulating behavior on the site, including the ability to flag players who misbehave. Many also have guidelines for parents and may even send you an update on your child's online activities.

To keep these worlds safe from predators and free from advertisers, many virtual worlds charge a subscription fee for access to all of their premium features. Some require you to buy a toy that has a code that unlocks the site for your child.

Why they matter

Online worlds are great places for kids' imaginations to run free. They can create different characters and try on different personalities. The challenge for parents is letting their children enjoy these other worlds without getting carried away. Some of the gaming worlds are really addictive and draw kids in for long periods. And even though virtual worlds have rules about behavior, some kids can find ways around these rules.

Also, most of these sites revolve around racking up virtual money. You win cash at games, then earn it by completing activities or even by spending a certain amount of time on the site. Some of these virtual worlds even have in-game purchases, which will entice kids to buy -- with actual money -- things to use on the site. In this regard, virtual worlds teach kids that they get rewarded for spending lots of time (and sometimes lots of money) online. The "free" virtual worlds rely mostly on advertising, so your child will be exposed to many commercial messages designed to build brand loyalty. In these games, kids usually aren't able to tell what's an ad and what's not.

Tips for parents of young kids

- **Kids younger than 6 probably shouldn't play in virtual worlds.** If kids can't read or write, they will be frustrated in online worlds. There are perfectly fun sites aimed at pre-school kids that are more age-appropriate.
- **If you wouldn't let your children have an unsupervised play date, don't let them online by themselves.** Remember, the social skills they bring to online worlds are the same ones they have (or don't have) in real life.
- **Do your homework.** Make sure you check out sites before you let your kids go online. And don't just have your children stop at the most popular social ones. There are also great sites that are educational.
- **Set non-negotiable time limits.** And make sure online play is balanced with real-life play.
- **Establish codes of conduct.** A good rule of thumb: If your kids wouldn't say something to someone's face, they should not say it in cyberspace.
- **Show kids how to flag inappropriate conduct.** It's easy for parents to learn how to use the flagging feature and it's important to show your kids how to use it, too. Explain that this is a healthy way to keep social networking sites safe and fun for everyone.
- **Make sure your children never share their passwords.** Often kids will give another child a password for help in a game. Explain that giving away a password is like giving someone your identity.
- **Talk about money and what it means to your family.** These sites rely on currency for buying extras. Don't let a social network site that needs customer loyalty in order to be profitable teach your kids about earning, saving, and spending. Explain your values.
- **Keep the computer in a central place.** This will let you monitor your child's online life.

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