



Kids' Virtual World Safety Tips from ConnectSafely.org

Virtual worlds are online spaces where kids create avatars (kind of like cartoon characters) through which they communicate, socialize, learn, shop, play games, and generally express themselves. There are hundreds of virtual worlds on the Web aimed at users of all ages. Some aimed at young children have controlled text chat, "profanity filters" to block offensive or sexually related chat, and staff or contractors moderating user behavior – you'll want to check for these safety features. Parents also need to know that there are worlds kids can find and access which are not designed for them.

As with all kids' online experiences, the No. 1 safety practice is routine parent-child communication. Keeping it low-key and frequent helps our kids come to us when stuff comes up. The most likely risks in kids' virtual worlds, just like on school playgrounds, are cyberbullying or peer harassment and social-circle drama – including clubby behavior and kids playing "teenager" and talking about "boyfriends," "girlfriends," "breakups," etc. The latter escalates and gets more sexually charged as they head into middle-school age. Language filters help, but kids can be creative with workarounds (see below). The main thing you need to know is that virtual worlds are user-driven: Positive experiences depend on users' behavior toward each other and how well the space is supervised. Here are some pointers for safe, constructive in-world experiences.

Get to know their "world": Ask your kids to show you around, and play in their virtual worlds with them occasionally – not to spy on them but to get to know the territory and find out what they're enjoying and why. See what their avatars look like and what screen names they've chosen to represent themselves. You can talk with them about what kind of message their profiles and avatars send about them – a great early lesson in new media literacy. See who their virtual friends are and what types of activities they like. Are they friends from school? If not, take the opportunity to talk about how people online aren't always who they seem to be. The No. 1 safety tip in all cases is "Talk with your kids"

Respect for self & others. Like other play places, virtual worlds are good social training grounds, when parents and educators are engaged in appropriate ways (supporting rather than managing them, if the goal is kids' learning, not just compliance). Teach your child that those are human beings with feelings behind avatars in their favorite worlds – they need to respect others' virtual property, privacy, and identity as much as in the real world. This is the beginning of digital citizenship, which is protective and empowering for them as they learn to navigate real and virtual social spaces.

Explore the site's safety features – ideally, right alongside your child. Virtual worlds aimed at children should have a section for parents that discusses their safety tools. These often include restricted chat, in which children choose pre-written phrases rather than type whatever they want. With young children, avoid sites with unrestricted chat and especially voice chat, and look for 24/7 moderation by site moderators. Be aware that some kids are very good at finding workarounds that moderators work hard to keep up with! Language

filtering is a baseline safety feature for all kids' virtual worlds. It blocks aggressive, potentially unsafe, or inappropriate text such as phone numbers, addresses, insults, and swear words. You'll also want to see if the site has easy-to-find tools or buttons for reporting abuse or getting moderators' help. Look at the site's terms of use, again ideally with your child (hopefully, they're written so a child can understand them).

Cyberbullying happens: Where there are kids, there are shenanigans. Behaviorally, kids' virtual worlds can be a lot like school play spaces, so be aware that even with controlled chat and tech and human moderation in place, kids sometimes find ways to be mean. Examples include kids abusing the abuse-reporting system to get peers kicked out by telling on them when they haven't broken any rules; using a blocking tool to ignore and ostracize someone; and designing alternative spelling and other creative ways around language filters (such as asking someone's age with "How many dots r u?" and getting back "....." from a 10-year-old).

Bullies get bullied. Even if you, like so many parents, think your child would never be a bully, make sure he or she knows that it definitely pays not to be. Research shows that kids who engage in aggressive behavior are more than twice as likely to be victimized. So help your kids understand that being kind and civil to others is protective as well as a powerful social skill. Help them see, too, that being a good citizen helps make their favorite virtual worlds nicer places to hang out for everybody.

Passwords need protecting! Start 'em young! Virtual worlds are great places for kids to learn the fundamental rule of password protection. For children as well as adults, a stolen password can turn into anything from embarrassing impersonation and bullying to property theft to identity theft. Children are known to share passwords to gain acceptance or show "true friendship," forgetting that even friends get mad sometimes or move on to be somebody's else's "BFF" ("best friend forever") instead. It's a good idea to sit down with your child periodically to help them change their password to something that's hard for people to guess but easy for both of you to remember.

Virtual consumerism or charity? Almost all kids' virtual worlds include a shopping feature – so users can outfit their avatars, buy and care for pets, furnish their avatars' "homes," etc. See how they earn points or coins (often by playing in-world games) and how much focus is placed on having more stuff than the next avatar. Some worlds have opportunities for real and virtual charitable giving and public service. Some even give parents tools to reward their kids in-world for good grades and doing chores in real life. It might be interesting to see how popular educational features actually are in your child's favorite VW and whether you can use them to help make civic engagement meaningful to your child (let us know what you think in the ConnectSafely forum!).

Critical thinking is crucial. Virtual worlds are great tools for learning about social influencing. Talk with your kids about the value of mindfulness and independent thought, not just following the crowd, online or offline. Encourage them to be as alert online as offline if people are being extremely nice or promising virtual gifts or cheats in games. Is this attempted manipulation? Is there an ulterior motive? Critical thinking about behavior, too – what they and others say, give, and upload as well as what they read, consume, and download – is protective as well as good for cognitive development. It's the "filter" between their ears that comes pre-installed, goes everywhere they do, and improves with age!