



Virtual World Safety Tips for Parents of Teens from ConnectSafely.org

Virtual worlds are online spaces where people create avatars (graphical representations of themselves) 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. Most aimed at youth have safety features, such as language filtering that restricts explicit, mean, or profane language. Some virtual worlds have people monitoring user behavior, while others leave it up to users to police themselves and their community.

So the No. 1 safety tip for virtual worlds, as for anything else, is good parent-child communication. Low-key, routine discussion about online experiences, just as with offline ones, makes it easier for them to talk with you when things come up. The most likely risks for teens in virtual worlds, just like in school halls and elsewhere, are cyberbullying or harassment and sexually suggestive communication among peers. Language filters help, but kids often have workarounds. Examples are alternative text understood by peers and various mean behaviors, such as ostracizing, ignoring, or reporting on peers with untruthful abuse reports; stalking others' avatars; and using people's passwords against them. Here are some pointers for safe, constructive in-world experiences.

Virtual worlds are user-driven. Positive experiences in virtual worlds largely depend on participants' behavior toward each other and how well the space is supervised. As with social network sites, most of the content in these worlds is the communications of their users and therefore more likely policed (or reacted to) than controlled. Parents need to know that 1) there are worlds that youth can find and access which are not designed for minors and do little to block them, and 2) some teen and adult worlds have communications tools in addition to instant messaging, in-world email, and text chat, including voice and video chat features. The latter can be risky for children and teens to use.

Talk with your teens about the virtual worlds they use – ask them to show you around. See what their avatars look like and what screen names they've chosen to represent themselves. What do their profiles and the appearance of their avatars say about them? Try to hold back snap judgments (long-term guidance usually works better than control if the goal is learning rather than short-term compliance). Are their virtual-world profiles linked to social-network ones, and how much do those linked-up profiles together reveal about them – too much? Are their in-world friends mostly friends they know in real life? If not, do they know that they can't really know who people are online unless they know them offline?

Virtual play, real reputations. By now all teens have heard that things they say in live game chat, type into VW chat windows, post in profiles, and text on phones can be captured and shared elsewhere. They know a comment can come back to haunt them, but research shows they don't always think about how – over time – texts and posts can collectively turn into a reputation that can be hard to turn around. Help your teens keep in mind that, in cyberspace, they have pretty permanent, searchable paper trails that they, other players,

and VW companies contribute to, consciously or unconsciously (e.g., companies often keep chat logs to track problem behavior).

Passwords are private! Research shows that kids tend to share their passwords with each other, so it's important teens understand how harmful that can be – that friends can sometimes be mean or stop being friends and can use passwords to impersonate and embarrass or hurt them. They may roll their eyeballs, but awareness of potential consequences might help them stop and think. [See our Password Security Tips for more.]

Check out site safety tools. Some virtual worlds for teens have a safety page for parents which explains their safety features. These might include a language filter, human moderators, abuse reporting, monitoring tools, etc. Whether or not there's a parents' page, consider going over safety features and terms of service with your teens – at least in the worlds they tell you they're using. Make sure they know where and how to report abuse in those worlds and, if provided for, how to block offending users.

Use those safety features. Encourage your children to represent their ages accurately when registering in virtual worlds – that's a key safety feature. Encourage them to use the safety and privacy features and to talk with you if something comes up in-world. Help them see that it helps the whole community when they report bullying or other inappropriate communication when it happens. It also helps the virtual world providers, who tend to rely heavily on user reports if they don't employ moderators for community policing. Ideally they're using worlds provided by responsible corporate citizens.

Watch for behavior changes. Just as in real-world spaces, stuff can happen in virtual ones, and kids can have strong emotional reactions. If your teens become upset or distant, aren't sleeping well, or are struggling academically, talk with them in a nonconfrontational way and see if spending less time socializing online would help (cutting off online time altogether can worsen problems, though, so calibrate "parental controls" carefully). Because virtual worlds can be pretty compelling, you may find the need to talk about and demonstrate the value of balance in our lives. If you're concerned a child is in danger, consider monitoring in-world activity as well as talking with the child. Some virtual worlds offer chat logs and other monitoring tools.

Virtual shopping and consumerism. Most virtual worlds allow users to shop for their avatars and furnish their virtual spaces. This is a great opportunity for kids to learn a little financial literacy and critical thinking about consumerism and marketing as well as charity. Some worlds include philanthropic and other features that teach civic engagement.

Critical thinking essential. Virtual worlds are great tools for learning about social influencing. Encourage your teens to be as alert online as offline if people are being extremely nice or offering excessive virtual gifts. Is this attempted manipulation? Is there an ulterior motive? Critical thinking about what they and others say, give, and upload as well as what they read, consume, and download is protective as well as empowering. It's the filter that goes everywhere they do and improves with age!

Citizenship is protective too. Because research shows that aggressive behavior more than doubles the aggressor's risk of victimization, civil behavior and digital citizenship can go a long way toward keeping in-world experiences positive and enriching. We can encourage our children to be stakeholders in their own well-being online and to help make their virtual world a better place for everyone involved.