

Common Sense on Online Worlds

for young kids

Some facts

- > **Online worlds are the fastest growing part of the Web for kids.**
- > **Most are relatively safe using pre-scripted or heavily filtered speech.**
- > **Kids are rewarded with “money” for time spent.**
- > **To get the best playing experience, kids often need to buy a subscription or toy, or view multiple ads on the site.**

Sure you trust a purple dinosaur. But what about a green penguin?

How do you know when a Web site for kids isn't just a marketing gimmick? Or a meaningless time-waster? It's hard. We know this, so we've done our research. Which will really help you do yours. Then you can decide in which worlds you'd like your child to play.

What are online worlds?

Club Penguin, Webkinz, Neopets, Dizzywood, and WeeWorld – these online sites are the new playgrounds for kids. They have games and places for kids to use their imaginations, test their skills, and interact with others. Kids choose “avatars” or cartoon representations of themselves and they are shielded by screen names. Therefore, most of the sites aimed at 6-10 year olds are safe from predators.

Why they matter

Online worlds are great places for a kids' imaginations to run free. They can create different personas and try on different characters. The hitch is letting them enjoy these other worlds without getting carried away. Some of the gaming worlds are really addictive and take a long time to progress through the game, keeping kids online for hours. And while in these worlds, your child is still susceptible to the usual petty cruelties of others.

Because almost all the sites have currency, your child will be taught to make “money” through activities and the length of time spent on the site. Kids learn they get rewarded for spending lots of time (and sometimes lots of your money) online. And there's real money involved, too, be it monthly subscriptions or toys with codes for online play. Finally, the “free” sites rely on advertising for the most part, so your child will be exposed to many commercial messages designed to build brand loyalty. And they won't even recognize that they're being advertised to.

Common Sense says:

- > **These sites are for 7-12 year olds. Younger kids shouldn't play.** If kids can't read or write, they shouldn't be in online worlds. There are perfectly fun sites aimed at pre-school kids that are more age-appropriate.
- > **If you wouldn't let a child 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. There are also great sites that are educational. Don't just have them stop at the most popular social ones.
- > **Set non-negotiable time limits** and make sure 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 better not say it in cyberspace.
- > **Show kids how to flag inappropriate conduct** and explain this is a healthy way to keep social networking sites safe and fun for everyone.
- > **Make sure they 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 their 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** so you can monitor your child's online life.

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