

Online Worlds

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversation with parents about online worlds like Club Penguin or World of Warcraft. Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the Online Worlds parent tip video and hand out the Online Worlds for Young Kids or Online Games parent tip sheets to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions

1. Does your child visit virtual world Web sites? If so, which ones are most popular? Why do kids spend so much time on these sites? What keeps them coming back?
2. What are some of the positive things kids can learn in virtual worlds? What are some of the negatives they might experience?
3. What are some social behaviors that a virtual world might foster? Do you think networking sites for kids help build good relationships? Why or why not?
4. What challenges have you faced with your own children as they explore these virtual worlds? How have you handled the situations? What worked? What didn't?

What would you do?

Stories to discuss, role play, and deepen conversation

Elementary school child

Denise's eight-year-old daughter Sarah loves to collect Webkinz, a brand of stuffed animals that offers a corresponding virtual world for children. Every time their family visits a store that carries Webkinz, Sarah begs for another. After all, the more Webkinz you have at home... the more pets you can register and play with online.

Sarah's best friend Naomi has a few Webkinz of her own, and the two girls have become increasingly glued to the site during their play dates. When Denise suggests that they play outside one day, Sarah replies, "Naomi's mom won't let her go onto Webkinz at home, so this is her only chance." Denise has always considered Webkinz.com to be a benign site, so the thought of asking Naomi's parents about the site never occurred to her.

- » Is it appropriate to monitor your child's media use at a friend's home? Why or why not?
- » If you were Denise, what might you discuss with Sarah after her play date?
- » How can parents whose kids play together in these virtual worlds help each other to get kids to balance computer play with playing in the "real world"?

Elementary / middle school child

Twelve-year-old Cindy really wants to go on Teen Second Life or Facebook, but she's too young. At the same time, her mom likes the idea of Cindy being a part of an online community for kids her age, preferably something that has educational value. She sits down with Cindy, and together they do a Web search for some appropriate sites for girls her age. They make a list, and her mom asks Cindy to put the list in order according to her preferences. Later, Cindy's mom takes a few minutes to look at the top three choices, checking out the "For Parents" sections, along with taking a tour of each site. She feels comfortable with two of Cindy's top three choices. She circles her approved choices on the list, then tacks it on the bulletin board next to the computer. Together, they sign up and start navigating one of the approved sites.

- » What techniques did Cindy's mom use so that Cindy felt a part of making online choices?
- » How else could Cindy's mom find information about the content / quality of these sites (besides visiting them)?

Elementary/ middle school child

Kim's son Zachary is thirteen years-old. A few months ago, Zach joined a virtual world for young teens called Whyville. Since then, Kim has noticed how much Zach's confidence has blossomed. She loves hearing him talk about the collaborative games he plays with other Whyvillians and is impressed with how computer savvy he has become.

One day, Kim glances at Zach's screen and sees his avatar throw a heart icon to a female avatar. Curious, she searches the web and discovers that throwing hearts and kisses on Whyville is a common way for avatars to flirt with one another. Kim is slightly concerned because she knows that Whyvillians can instant message one another, too. Who knows what Zach has been typing?

- » How has the nature of flirting and dating changed since you were an adolescent, as a result of social media?
- » What are some ways for parents talk to their kids about developing romantic relationships online?
- » Why might online worlds be beneficial for teens' as they develop social skills? Harmful?
- » Would this situation be different if Kim needed to confront her daughter ? What role does gender play?

High School Teen

Yasmin's husband Michael loves to play World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Exhausted after work, Michael spends most of his evenings playing on the computer. Their sixteen-year-old son Ben loves to play video games too. Lately, Yasmin has noticed that he keeps a window open on his computer screen for one of his virtual worlds while doing homework.

Yasmin and Ben frequently argue about his increasing game usage. "It's so unfair that you think I play video games too much when Dad is on Warcraft all the time!" he says. "Besides, I always get my homework done." Yasmin is also concerned about Ben's interaction with adult gamers. Are all MMORPG players as well-intended as her husband?

- » If you were Yasmin, how would you try to remedy this situation?
- » What are some ways that parents can work together to discuss family rules about Internet and game usage?
- » In an age where kids are constantly connected to different forms of media, how can parents discuss the benefits and drawbacks of multitasking?
- » How can Yasmin talk to her son about interacting safely with strangers online?

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