

Virtual Worlds for Children. Too much of a good thing?

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Summary Virtual worlds for children – what are they?

Virtual worlds for children – what are they? Basically, they're the online version of playing make-believe. There is a whole new wave of Web sites that provide virtual worlds for children – places where they can dress dolls, care for animals, or outfit characters in online games. Moreover, the dolls, animals and characters serve as avatars (virtual world stand-ins for the kids, themselves) that the kids control as they interact and socialize with other kids who have created similar characters. Some of the sites also offer chat and an educational component. On the surface, these seem like safe and healthy activities, but are they?

Big Business Built on Children

Tens of millions of kids are visiting and joining these virtual world Web sites. Among the most popular sites are [Club Penguin](#), [Stardoll](#), [Trollz](#), and [Webkinz](#). If you have a tween (a child between 8 and 12) or slightly younger child, a PC, and an Internet connection, you've probably heard of these sites and the buzz they're creating.

These virtual world Web sites are all commercial enterprises. Club Penguin, for example, charges a monthly membership fee for access to all the site's features (limited access is available for free). Stardoll sells virtual merchandise. Trollz features advertising and sells merchandise. Becoming a member of Webkinz requires that you buy a stuffed animal from a retail store or online merchant. They also sell add-on merchandise, including trading cards. These sites, in other words, are in business to make money and the more often kids visit the sites and the longer they stay the more money the site makes. Therein lies the problem.

Time Limits in the Virtual World

In an effort to maximize the time that kids spend in these virtual worlds, the sites include contests and competitions that enable kids to earn or win points, virtual money, or virtual accessories that they can use to improve their characters - such as a banana for a virtual monkey or new outfits for a virtual doll. To get these prizes kids stay on the site longer, sometimes too long. For example, according an article on [CNN Money](#), the average visit to Webkinz lasts over two hours. That's probably longer than you want your kids to stay in the virtual world at any one sitting. Consider setting time limits on virtual world play, or allowing play only on certain days, or after offline activities like homework, setting the table or other chores are done.

Virtual vs. Real World

Like the gaming and social networking Web sites that older teens and adults frequent, the virtual world sites aimed at younger kids can become addictive. To kids, the virtual world can seem more important than the real one. While playing make-believe in the virtual world can be a positive social learning experience, it's not a substitute for the real world. Kids and parents should always remember that it's important to spend more time in the real world, interacting with kids and adults, learning real things about real life from real people.

Visit the virtual world

It's a good idea to have a rule that your kids can't join any Web site, especially a virtual world site, without your permission. Before you give your permission, you should –

- Visit the Web site your child wants to join.
- Ask your child to show you around.
- Determine the objective of the site. Does it cost to join? Does it entice purchases? Do kids play for points or virtual money? Or what?
- Read the privacy policy to make sure you understand how the site keeps your child's information safe.
- Look for a parents' guide that explains how the site works, and how it protects your child.
- If there is a chat function, make sure that it protects your child from **predators**, because children are especially vulnerable when they're caught up in the excitement and fantasy of a virtual world.
- See if parents have the ability to control the chat function.
- Sit with your child as they join the site to ensure that the site doesn't ask for too much personal information, and so your child doesn't reveal things they shouldn't.
- Make sure it's possible to cancel a membership and that your child's information will be destroyed when you cancel.
- Make sure the site enables you to block your child from visiting, should you need to.
- If your exploration of the Web site leaves you with any unanswered questions, contact the site and ask.

In all things, moderation

As we often point out, the online or virtual world is a lot like the real one, and the same rules, truths and axioms apply in both. In moderation, kids playing make-believe in a virtual world can be a positive experience. Similarly, staying too long in the virtual world and excluding the wonders, challenges and beauty of the real world is not a very good idea.