

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

Virtual Worlds and Kids: Mapping the Risks

Virtual worlds are computer-simulated online “places” where people use avatars — graphic characters — to represent themselves. Some virtual worlds are intended for children: they have built-in protections to keep their experience age-appropriate. Others are designed for adults. Virtual worlds can be accessed in various ways: some are massive, multi-player games, often accessed through a gaming console; others are online communities where avatars’ activities rely on their users’ imaginations.

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation’s consumer protection agency, many virtual worlds say they’re for adults only and try to verify that visitors are over 18 before they can enter. But a posted age requirement may not stop kids — especially curious teens — from finding their way in, either accidentally or otherwise.

The anonymity that avatars provide can encourage people to “act out” behaviors that may be considered inappropriate, particularly for tweens and teens. Indeed, visitors may find the online equivalent of a red-light district, with simulated sexual activity or violence.

How can you help your kids avoid content — or virtual spaces — that may be inappropriate for them? Start by talking to them about where they’re going online — and how they’re getting there, if not through the family computer. Help them understand that personal information about themselves, family members, and friends should stay private; you also can talk to them about avoiding sex talk or sexual situations online.

If your child visits a virtual world, you may want to check it out, too. Get to know what’s on the site, the privacy protections it offers, and how it verifies the ages of site visitors.

If your child gets really interested in online gaming or virtual worlds, watch for changes in their patterns of behavior that could indicate an unhealthy obsession. Nobody knows your child better than you do, so you’re best placed to know what sites may be appropriate for your child.

For more information about kids’ online safety, visit **OnGuardOnline.gov**. The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit **ftc.gov** or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.



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