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Pre-MySpace Social Networking

My daughter, [Sophia](#), is 8 and is in love with [Webkinz](#). I bought her her first stuffed Webkinz toy about three months ago and ever since she ripped off the tag with the online code she has been going online several times a week to play with her virtual puppy. She has to care for and feed her little dog, and she has to earn money to buy things for it. She earns this money by playing one of many games offered, and most of those games are educational. I wouldn't admit it to Sophia but I actually enjoy one of the games where you have to form words based on an arranged group of letters, with points coming from forming more complex words.

But it's more than just online play. Many of Sophia's classmates also have Webkinz. She comes home after school and can "play" with her friends online, caring for their animals together. This social aspect is teaching her all about online interactions and how to balance the real with the virtual. She can chat with those people she adds to her friends list, but the safeguards that Webkinz builds into their site is impressive. I'm quoting here from the [Webkinz FAQ](#):

First, users cannot chat with you unless they are added to your friends list. If you get a request to join your friends list from a user that you do not know, rejecting that request will prevent any chat from occurring. You can also delete any user from your friends list at any time, and we will remove you from the other user's list as well. Also note that nowhere in Webkinz World can another user discover your user name. Users may guess a user name, but we do not display them anywhere on the site.

Finally, our chat is entirely constructed. There is no way for a user to type what they want, nor ask or say anything inappropriate to any other user. We control everything the users are able to say. We have designed our dictionary of choices to put safety first. There is no way to exchange any personal information of any sort.

With the immense popularity of MySpace and other online social networking sites it is important for parents to introduce their kids slowly to the world of online social networking. Webkinz, and other places like [Clubpenguin](#) and [IMbee](#), all serve as introductions to this online world.

Today's *New York Times* has a good article, [My Daughter, the Burger-Flipping Penguin](#), about [ClubPenguin](#) and online sites for elementary aged kids. The article discusses the role these sites play in kid's lives and what parents can do to be a part of that online life:

It's parents who can't keep up. Even after being reassured by representatives of these sites that they guard my child's privacy and by psychologists that sitting at a screen for hours won't kill her imagination, I wonder what she's doing, whom she's talking to and — here's the part I find most mysterious — why it's fun.

This is a generation gap I may never bridge, having grown up in a time when typewriters roamed the earth and grazed alongside rotary dials. When I was Clementine's age, we had a telephone exchange named "Terrace" and my phone number was TE3-2748.

Am I the only parent lost in the 21st century?

"No, but it definitely complicates the parenting process," Marjorie Taylor, the head of the psychology department at the University of Oregon, said during a phone interview. "Children fairly quickly are surpassing their own parents' expertise in understanding online worlds."

"It reminds me she's going to surpass me in all kinds of other ways, too," I said. "I was hoping to be dead, or at least very old, before that happened."

Professor Taylor commiserated. "These are new territories we're exploring here with this generation of children, with technology moving as quickly as it is," she said. "We tend to think they can't understand the difference between fantasy and the real world, and that's just not true. Here's a way we can see them moving back and forth."

What really stands out in my mind about Sophia's enjoyment of Webkinz is how much she has learned in the past few months about being online. Sophia has had a computer of her own since she was six, and even though she is restricted in what she can do with it (yes, I use an internet filter) she has a large selection of games and online sites she can visit. But her use of the computer has changed in the past few months. She now goes online with a purpose, with a specific site to visit and with the expectation of interacting with her friends. She'll often ask to call one of her friends so that they can go online and play with her. Her keyboarding skills have improved and she is comfortable using online search to find answers to simple questions. I still try to spend time with her while she's online, but I'm growing more confident in her ability to navigate around the online world.

Posted by Michael on May 3, 2007 07:26 AM | [Permalink](#)

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Cool sites, Michael!

I'm going to show these to my daughter, Ginger who is 9. BTW, we also use an internet filter at home.

Posted by: Leigh Hall | [May 4, 2007 09:57 AM](#)

That game you like sounds a bit like Word Whomp on Pogo.com. My mother is a Pogo addict to the point that she can't do anything online except play games, sadly.

Posted by: Tonya | [May 15, 2007 10:54 AM](#)

So what Internet Filter do you use at home? I'm grappling with moving from a 1 computer set up (in the den) to multiple computers and wireless. I've an 8 yr. old and a 13 yr. old who are both Internet users. Right now we use the "parents are in proximity" filter, but with a new computer coming soon from Grandma for the oldest, I think it's time for me to be more proactive.

Hope you're doing well! Chris

Posted by: [Chris Bates](#) | [May 18, 2007 01:17 PM](#)

My kids love Club Penguin and Webkinz also, but at 7 and 9 I am still concerned about the IM ability at Club Penguin. They can also invite anyone to be their "buddy". I have my kids set up on a very cute, kid friendly email at zilladog.com so they can communicate with friends and relatives in a secure environment.

Posted by: Christine | [May 30, 2007 10:41 PM](#)

(Written by a kid)

I use both of these sites(Club Penguin as well as Webkinz) and they are both vary child oriented. I enjoy winning free stuff in the Wheel of Wow,(Webkinz) and spelling words in Quizzys Word Challenge(also Webkinz), and then sometimes I go sledding(Club Penguin).

Posted by: Patrick | [June 6, 2007 01:52 PM](#)

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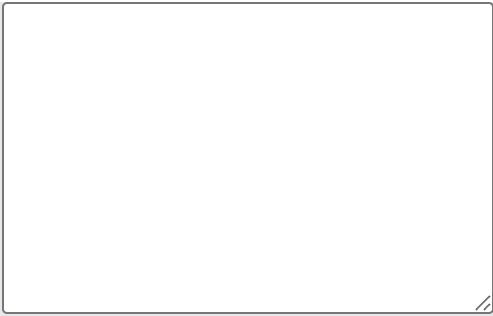
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