

Pointers For Parents

Safe Online Games For Kids

(NAPSA)—Kids and computers— from keyboard to joystick, children are spending more time learning and playing on the PC than ever before. Online gaming in particular is growing, as the Internet continues to reach more and more homes, schools and libraries.

There are currently 50 million people who play online games worldwide, according to DFC Intelligence, a San Diego-based consulting firm focused on interactive gaming. That number is expected to reach 114 million by 2006.

At the rate kids learn technology, it's easy for parents to feel left in the dark. Fortunately, there are some easy ways to help ensure your child is accessing safe and appropriate games—without unplugging the computer:

Check the Rating

Many online games come with ratings designated by a trade association that reviews almost every game on the store shelves and many online. You'll find these rating symbols on software packages, and also on the home pages of many gaming sites. Just as you would consider a movie rating before taking your child to the theater, you can use game ratings to determine whether the content is appropriate for your child. Since 68 percent of all video and online games are rated "E" for everyone, you should find something fun for your child that lets you rest a little easier.

Encourage "Contained" Sites

Some online games are "contained," meaning kids can't switch to a Web site that you haven't authorized. The latest example is Planet Hot Wheels (www.planethotwheels.com), a free online gaming site where kids customize and race virtual Hot Wheels cars head-to-head in real time against friends.

"We've focused on making Planet Hot Wheels safe and fun for kids, as well as worry-free for parents," said Amy Boylan, senior



Youngsters can find friends and fun around the world with safe yet exciting Web site games.

vice president of new media for Boys/Entertainment, Mattel. "We came up with a completely self-contained interactive universe where kids can play games or race against friends, and since there's no browser on the screen, they can't get out and explore other Web sites that parents might find objectionable."

Do Frequent Walk-bys

Parenting experts recommend that you walk in and out of the room frequently when your child is using the computer. Kids are less likely to risk exploring inappropriate material if they know you might interrupt at any moment. If your child switches the screen suddenly when you enter the room, it can be a clue that he or she was accessing an unauthorized destination.

Play Along with Your Child

According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, 92 percent of kids ages 2-17 play computer or video games, making it virtually inevitable that your child will come into contact with online gaming. So, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. You just might be surprised at how much fun some of the games will be for you—and your kids may think you're the coolest parent ever.

Visit www.planethotwheels.com to see the first online multi-player permanent universe for kids.