



A SECOND LIFE/SECOND LIFE TEEN PRIMER FOR PARENTS

Experts predict that within 3 years, 53% of teens will be using virtual worlds, like Second Life. It's important to understand these environments to keep your children safe when using this unique online place.

You may have heard of Second Life from friends, or perhaps seen one of the many news reports about it. Maybe you have even tried it after seeing it on a TV episode of *CSI:NY* or *The Office*. Second Life is actually strictly divided into Second Life and Second Life Teen. Second Life's "main grid" is an adult world, and not for children, but Teen Second Life can be a fun and educational place for your child. But you need to be informed to assist your child in participating safely.

What Is Second Life?

First things first. Second Life is 3D "virtual world" accessed over the Internet in which people create video-game type characters, called avatars, to represent themselves. It is a social network, much like MySpace or Facebook, but its 3D nature mimics "real" spaces very closely, like neighborhoods, malls, concerts, or even classrooms.

Avatars can walk, run, fly through the space – again like a video game, but in this case the purpose is to meet with friends, chat, or attend events, like concerts or classes. Avatars also have building tools that allow people to create virtual clothing, buildings, furniture, accessories or entire environments. Second Life has an economy and virtual currency that makes buying and selling of items – and even services – possible. In fact, over \$1 million (in U.S. dollars) is spent every day in Second Life.

The "main" Second Life is never a place for your child, under any circumstances. While not pervasive, it does contain adult content and adults from all walks of life, participating in all the same activities you find in the "real world." The terms of use for Second Life requires that users to be 18 or over.

Second Life Teen

Second Life Teen is an entirely separate, closed-to-adults virtual world where teens 13-17 can participate. This area has age verification imposed and requires a parent create the account and that it is tied to a cell phone or a PayPal account to ensure only teens inhabit the space. The only adults allowed in all teen areas are members of the company that owns Second Life, Linden Lab, and are clearly identified as a "Linden." These "liaisons" are consistently in the teen world.

Educators and youth non-profit organizations are active in Teen Second Life, however any adult associated with an education or non-profit organization must submit to a

background and criminal check, and are only allowed on that organization's specific "island" in Second Life Teen – they cannot roam into the general teen areas.

Some of these organizations are holding camps, classes or global awareness projects that your teen may ask or be invited to participate in. A few colleges are holding recruitment fairs in Second Life Teen.

Areas of Concern

Although Linden Lab works diligently to keep Second Life Teen safe, there are areas of concern to be aware of.

Linden Labs asks that parents not actively operate their teen's avatar, however there is no way to enforce this or even to detect who is operating an avatar at any given time.

The immersive nature of 3D environments feels very "real." Close friendships form in a very compressed timeframe in these worlds. Emotional attachments as well as the "dramas" that happen in Second Life are indistinguishable, especially for teens, from real life and can profoundly affect your teen emotionally, just as "real" friendships do.

Every avatar has a profile – much like on MySpace – which anyone can click on and read. There should never be any personally identifiable information of any kind included – no photo, phone, address, school, etc. entered into this profile.

Some third-party applications are available that tie Second Life friends with your teen's MySpace or Facebook page. This makes it possible to tie any personally identifiable information on those social network pages with your teen's avatar identity.

Second Life users have two methods of communication – chat and instant messaging. Chat is "public" in that any other avatar in the area can "overhear" what two or more people are chatting about. Teens could inadvertently share personal or confidential information when "speaking" to a trusted friend, but overheard by someone else they don't know.

Once your child turns 18, their account is automatically transferred to the adult Second Life area.

Teens can acquire property – and it is possible for another teen to scam them out of their virtual possessions.

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Tips for Parents

- Monitor the amount of time your teen is spending in Second Life, and ask about their favorite activities and people. Have them show you around. You can also request a record of the account activity for your teen's account from Linden Lab. They have a form on their web site.
- Ask to see their avatar profile – and check all of the “tabs” within it – each tab holds different types of information.
- Instruct your teen to be aware of using chat when discussing anything related to “real life” that might disclose sensitive information. Make sure your teen understands the public nature of chat and the more private nature of IM in Second Life.
- Make sure your teen knows they can call on Linden liaisons via instant messaging at any time. They should report any bullying or anything that makes them uncomfortable to Linden and to you.
- Watch for signs of any strong emotional reactions associated with Second Life or with the time before or after they are in Second Life.
- If your teen is involved in an educational program in Second Life, talk to the teacher and make sure you are comfortable with its suitability for your teen.
- It is possible to tie text messaging and social networks together with Second Life. Ask your teen if they use these features. Instruct your teen not to provide their mobile phone number to anyone in Second Life. Be sure your teen is using the text messaging service that relays the message (rather than direct texting) if your teen wants to use this feature in Second Life.
- Monitor the information on social networks that there is no personally identifiable information there that can be combined with Second Life information, such as their Second Life avatar name.
- Advise your teen not to transfer their virtual goods to anyone they don't know – or believe anyone who claims to be a celebrity or agent.
- You can turn on a feature that logs all chat dialogue. Respect your teens' privacy, but if you have any concerns, you can monitor who they are chatting with and the subject of their chat. It is saved as a text file on the computer used to log into Second Life Teen.
- Tell your teen to never meet anyone offline that they don't know in “real life.”