

# SECOND LIFE FOR PARENTS

Three-dimensional online worlds and 'virtual' realities may seem daunting to newcomers, but they offer a world of possibilities for the adventurous.

By Lee Hopkins

[www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)

Every month around 750,000 people venture into Second Life, a three-dimensional online world that is the best representation yet of a virtual alternate reality.

It is a virtual world without parallel, offering many attractions that the real world can't match. Second Life "residents" can engage in games and other recreational activities, or create virtual objects such as houses, furniture and clothes for fun or profit, while mingling with people from around the globe.

For some parents this will ring alarm bells, in terms of the potential for children to be exposed to adult-only content or cyberstalking by paedophiles.

Thankfully, many of our fears are largely unwarranted. Contrary to expectations, the average second life inhabitants are not socially-backward teenagers or shady old men sitting alone in the dark.

Residents of Second Life are most often in their mid 30s, equally likely to be male or female, well-educated and reasonably affluent in terms of both time and money. The online world is a very accurate reflection of the real world—what you find in our streets is what you will find online—with all the beauty, kindness, generosity and, yes, ugliness of our daily experience.

That is not to say that less desirable elements of the population do not exist, but they are tiny in number compared to the other 10 million residents.

Like other online communities Second Life is taking every action possible to ensure the safety - both physical and psychological - of its community members.

For example, Second Life requires every new 'resident' to provide their credit card details, which are validated when they join - not to bill them, but to ensure that the person signing up is a 'real' person and is old enough to be accessing

the virtual world. Under 18s are unlikely to have a credit card, and so the risk of them gaining access to the adult-only areas within Second Life is therefore small.

There is also a special version of Second Life created specifically for teenagers under 18 years of age called Teen Second Life. This is a well monitored area where any suspicion of adult content is pounced upon by the owners of the world, Linden Lab. Those guilty of misconduct are immediately banned for life from accessing any of the Second Life worlds.

In addition, there are very strict join-up checks that act as deterrents. Adults must apply to Linden Lab if they wish to gain entrance to Teen Second Life, and so far only academics and teachers who have the full approval of their academic institution have been granted access.

But lastly, and most importantly, the teenagers in Teen Second Life are themselves the best police. According to many academics and teachers who openly work with them, the teen "residents" run contests amongst themselves and take great pride in "sniffing out" adults who are pretending to be teenagers. Once "sniffed", the reporting mechanism works incredibly quickly.

Teen Second Life and Second Life are two fantastic 3D worlds, where "residents" have the opportunity to create, buy and sell objects, to meet others, to try new personalities and "play" at being adults before they enter the real world. Teen Second Life also happens to be one of the safest areas on the Internet for your teenage children.

Why not join Second Life yourself and see what the fun is all about? ■

# VIRTUAL WORLDS APART

A plethora of virtual worlds are now appearing online, offering many forms of safe amusement for young adventurers.

**By Lee Hopkins**



**TIP:** Share the experience with your child. Ask to be taken through the site and determine for yourself if it's appropriate.

There are plenty of online virtual worlds that your children may be visiting, with bizarre names including Millsberry, Kaneva, vSide, Entropia, HiPiHi, Odoglio City, Habbo, Club Penguin, *There.com* and MTV's worlds. Many of them use human-like avatars (2D and 3D characters) and allow the player to make choices about their personality, clothing, type of environment and much more.

While *Second Life* is geared more towards adults, for many worlds the accent is strongly on teen and/or pre-teen members. The owners of the worlds taking great care to ensure that content and interactions remain very age-appropriate.

Most of these worlds place visitors safely inside a preconceived environment where they can interact with others and even buy clothes, visit the school cafeteria (even avatars need food to survive!) and borrow school books (and pay fines with virtual money if they're returned late!).

These worlds are moderated 24 hours a day, every day, by professional moderators. The moderators are fully trained and players can ask them for help at any time. Conversations are logged and can be monitored at any time without warning, with any questionable behaviour reported to the police.

Some worlds even put every conversation through filters before they appear on the screen, to eliminate swearing, racist and sexist terms and other words unsuitable for children. The filters also remove email addresses and phone numbers so that they can't be accidentally or deliberately given out.

In addition, all of these worlds work hard to educate members about being safe online. Many worlds produce regular newsletters containing articles on safety, along with prominently displayed safety information. ■