

Common Sense on Club Penguin

Virtual recess with penguin friends

It's snow-covered and full of adorable penguins in bright colors. This online world is open to all young people, which means they are free to create and play, but also free to spend lots and lots of time there. Read on for some great ways to help your kids balance this fun virtual world with the equally fun real one.

Some facts

Club Penguin gets millions of visits per month.

A parent's email address is required for account verification.

Users can play for free or subscribe for a monthly fee to access premium features.

Penguins are banned for 24 hours if someone flags their language as inappropriate.

Kids can chat using controlled or filtered greetings.

What is it?

Club Penguin from Disney is a hugely popular virtual world for elementary school kids. Kids create penguin characters and hang out with others — most often, their friends from school — to chat and play games in a cartoon environment. Although standard membership is free, paid memberships bring more privileges, such as buying clothes or things to decorate your “igloo” and more “puffles” (small puffy friends). Players are also rewarded for time spent playing games with coins that they use to buy more stuff to send to other members.

No ads appear on the site, but there is a store that sells real merchandise like shirts, hats, and key chains. Club Penguin has invested a great deal in the area of parental controls, including time-management features, and the site constantly upgrades parents' abilities to manage the site. The site also does a great job of ensuring that kids know the rules — for example, not asking questions about age or location of other puffles.

Why it matters

Most children over 7 know about this site and are probably on it. Although Club Penguin is one of the safer virtual worlds out there, it still has some areas to pay attention to. For one thing, it's a real time-killer. Kids can spend hours in front of the screen exploring the different environments, chatting with new-found “friends,” trying on outfits, or just waiting for another penguin to strike up a conversation. Every hour a child spends in front of a screen is one she doesn't spend reading, writing, jumping, playing, or imagining.

And then there's the whole social-interaction aspect. Kids can be exposed to some not-so-friendly behavior; your child could get a mean face icon (meaning “no”) in response to “Wanna be friends?” Though the site has strong content controls, some kids try and get around the site's filters by devising creative spellings of filtered words (like using “\$” for “S,” for example). Virtual snowballs can also be thrown at random although most kids seem to like this!. The site also focuses a lot on earning and spending money: The more clothes, accessories, and stuff you have for your igloo, and the more puffles you have, the cooler you are.

Parent tips for young kids

- » **Go online and check out the site.** Make sure you are comfortable with the content and style of socializing.
- » **Don't let your littlest ones play.** If your children are under 7, this kind of social networking and game site isn't age appropriate. They don't have the social skills to negotiate in a playground where speech may be monitored, but actions aren't. Plus, it's aimed at older kids.
- » **Make sure you set up parental controls.** They will help kids stick to time limits (using a Club Penguin timer) and the social interactions that are best for their ages.
- » **Set computer time limits.** Online games like Club Penguin can easily become time-consuming. Kids will be sucked into playing "just one more game" or flipping through the new penguin hairstyles to buy. Kids have no "off" switches at this age so they need you to push "off" for them. Try using a kitchen timer or stop watch.
- » **Show your child how to use the safety features.** Before your kids start, make sure they know how to click on the moderator button or the ignore/block buttons to report inappropriate behavior.
- » **Talk about sharing personal information online.** What's okay to share online? Hobbies, favorite music, etc. are fine. What's not okay is any personal identifier or contact information (not that you can do it on Club Penguin). No sharing passwords.
- » **Keep passwords private.** Some kids give friends their passwords so they can help them play games. This means they're giving away control of their online identity — a big no-no.
- » **Talk about chat etiquette.** If kids wouldn't say something to someone's face, they shouldn't text, chat, or IM it either.
- » **Have a conversation about buying and spending money.** Share your values about money with your kids. Even though it uses pretend cash, Club Penguin puts a strong emphasis on getting and spending.
- » **Teach kids to flag inappropriate use.** Inappropriate language and asking personal questions are against the rules on Club Penguin and kids should know how to flag users that aren't playing nicely. Kids should use this tool responsibly. Some kids are known to harass others by reporting them for no reason.