

VR and Metaverse Safety

Top Ten Tips for Parents

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We have all been hearing about the metaverse much more frequently over the last few years, and consideration of its promises and perils has picked up tremendous pace in recent months. It is being designed by multiple companies to further connect us to each other and to the experiences we love. And it's doing so by providing unique, interactive environments for us to explore as avatars or other embodiments of one's identity online. In truth, it feels like a natural iteration, building on Web 2.0's flat and largely asynchronous interfaces and combining our favorite features from the history of social media platforms, gaming worlds, extended reality (Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), or a combination thereof), and online transactions. Below we offer a list of ten tips to consider when introducing the children under your care to a VR environment.

1. SKEPTICISM IS HEALTHY. Remind children to be suspicious of anyone who asks sensitive or personal questions. In VR environments, the interactions can feel quite real, innocent, and well-intentioned. However, there is no reason why anyone else needs to know what school they go to, how old they are, their Snap or Instagram username, or any other information that might open up a pathway of unwanted access into your child's life. This may be worth stating regularly—even if it seems basic. Relatedly, youth must be reminded that any one or anything can be embodied in an avatar – from an actual child predator to a bot looking to infect your device with a virus by tricking you to open a lootbox or download a new skin.

2. INSIST THAT YOUR TEEN SHARE THEIR IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES WITH YOU. While VR headsets are used by only one person, you can still screencast or mirror what they are seeing onto your phone, monitor, TV, or other device on the same Wi-Fi network. While you likely won't be paying full attention to what they are doing, it still provides a measure of deterrence to encourage appropriate behavior on their part.

3. USE THE BASIC SAFETY CONTROLS THAT THE SOFTWARE PROVIDES. Encourage your child to mute or block any user who acts in harmful ways towards them. If their experience is not serving them (with enjoyment), they should set up boundaries to protect themselves against it. They can always unblock the user in the future. Relatedly, they should formally report any user who is abusive. If your child doesn't report them, they may be contributing to the victimization of someone else in the future by silently allowing it to continue.



4. USE UNLOCK PATTERNS TO HELP AGE-GATE VR CONTENT. If one of your children shares a headset with siblings of different ages and maturity levels, you can set up specific unlock patterns for different games or apps. For instance, your older teen would know (and could use) it to play a game you've allowed her to play, while your younger teen would not be able to (unless the older teen lets them, or if the younger teen is specifically using the older teen's or parent's account). You can also set up an unlock pattern for the headset – thereby controlling access and serving as a reminder that the use of these technologies in your home is a privilege, and not a right. (Pro-tip: If you do this, make sure you do not forget it or you will have to factory-reset your device and lose all of the data associated with the apps or games you've been using).

5. MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD KNOWS HOW TO SWITCH BETWEEN IN-GAME SERVERS. In this way, they can quickly extricate themselves from an increasingly desperate situation where a group of harassers or "griefers" are coming after them and they don't know what to do. While not every VR world provides this functionality, most do. Related to this, periodically ask them (in a non-judgmental, non-critical way) how certain VR games and apps make them feel – as well as what they like and don't like in these spaces.

6. RESTRICT THE ACCESS OF YOUNGER CHILDREN TO SINGLE PLAYER, NOT MULTI-PLAYER, GAMES. When you are ready to introduce children to multiplayer games, consider those that are cooperative in nature and require teamwork, instead of simply allowing them to roam free in VR environments where there is not a point or purpose except for socializing. Additionally, choose to be intentional in introducing them to games and apps that teach mastery of real-world disciplines – such as science, tech, travel, or culture.

7. MASTER THE ADVANCED SAFETY FEATURES THAT COMPANIES ARE NOW RELEASING. In 2016, Microsoft introduced the "Space Bubble" in their social VR platform AltspaceVR, where users can only come to about one foot of your avatar before their hands and body disappear from your view. In 2022, Meta released a feature called "Personal Boundary" where another user's forward movement towards you is halted if they come within four feet. Meta also created a tool called "Safe Zone" which can be activated by a user at any time. When employed, no one else can touch, talk, or interact with you until you deactivate it. Finally, with some VR platforms users can quickly and completely extricate themselves from unsafe interactions or situations by toggling back to the Main Menu or Control Center. Do your children know about these tools? Are they using them as protective measures? If not, the harm they experience can be quite visceral given the more personal, intense, and vivid types of interaction that are taking place in these immersive environments.



8. CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES EXTERNAL TO VR. Ask your child to use their VR device at volumes low enough to hear interruptions from family members. This often also requires them to turn off noise-cancellation in their headphones. Additionally, you want to make sure they won't be startled if you touch them, bump into them, or otherwise try to get their attention. A person can truly "lose" themselves in these environments, and so such considerations are necessary. Relatedly, make sure there is ample physical space around your child when they are using their VR device. We have heard stories of bumps, bruises, and other minor injuries occurring simply because the child loses their sense of spatial awareness in the room. Headset manufacturers are now releasing new features to set up boundaries in VR to alert users when they get too close to the edges of your specified playspace, or to allow users to see outlines of people or objects beyond their headset-restricted view.

9. THINK THROUGH THE REALITY OF PHYSIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES. Eye-strain, the onset or worsening of nearsightedness, motion sickness, disorientation, headaches, or 'gorilla arms' (a form of shoulder strain when your arms are extended forward from your body) all have been associated with using VR devices. If they occur, moderation or cessation may be necessary. Also, if your child is susceptible to seizures from flashing or bright lights, use discretion. These devices should be calibrated for each user; the settings are not "one size fits all." Doing so can prevent health complications and increase enjoyment from the VR experience.



10. CONSIDER THE PRIVACY ISSUES THAT ACCOMPANY USE OF THESE DEVICES, GAMES, AND APPS. They are designed to track your eye movements and body movements, and likely are recording your location and various personal preferences. Try to limit the data that you provide to VR-related companies because it may be exploited for marketing or tracking purposes. Additionally, access to in-game purchases or online stores may be a concern. Talk to your child about what they can and cannot buy without permission from you to prevent impulsive purchases if your credit card is linked to their account.