

Common Sense on Self-Expression and Identity

What's the issue?

In the offline world, unless it's Halloween it's pretty clear who you are. But in the digital world, kids can be anyone they want to be and make up new identities. They can be penguins, zombies, or ninjas. Their screen names can be SexyKitten or AngryBoy. They can make up screen names and create fake profiles. Kids can also design avatars — cartoon characters that are their alternate selves — to look any way they want.

Why it matters

Making new identities online can be a safe and creative way for kids to explore who they are. And having an alternate identity can be a real gift for a kid who's shy or afraid of being rejected by classmates.

On the other hand, a digital identity can be a way for kids to avoid personal consequences. When kids hide behind their online identities, they can push limits and act in ways they wouldn't in the offline world. Some kids may explore anti-social or harmful identities — like being a bully or someone who talks about hurting themselves or other people. Other kids share too much information and create reputations that might hurt them in the future.

Either way, if there's a big difference between an online and offline identity, it can hurt a kid's sense of self. This is especially true when an online identity gets a lot of attention and positive feedback, and kid starts to rely on it. They may even do things that they know are silly or dangerous to just to feel daring and have people talking about them.

What can parents do?

- » **Talk to your kids about anonymity.** Just because your kids are disguised doesn't mean they can't be identified. They must be responsible for their actions, whether they're portrayed as a penguin or a person.
- » **Remember that exploration is part of growing up.** Ask questions about your kids' online identities. Why did they make the choices they did?
- » **If your kids' avatars or screen names concern you, talk with them.** Ask questions about their choices. And don't be too quick to worry or judge. Their identities can mean something deep, or simply be the result of a whim.
- » **Identities grounded in hatred, violence, illegal activities, or risky sexual behavior should be avoided entirely.** No child needs to be associated with unhealthy or unethical behavior.
- » **Ask your kids to think about whom they want to be in their online life.** Is the digital identity they're creating currently how they want to be seen? How about in 5 years? In 20 years? Remind them that they have the power to present and control their identities and reputations.

