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. Online, your kids can be penguins, zombies, or ninjas. Their screen names can be SexyKitten or AngryBoy. The fact is, in digital life kids can be anyone they want to be. They can make up screen names, create fictitious profiles, or look any way they want by designing an avatar (a cartoon alter ego) that is only restricted by their imaginations.

Why Does It Matter?

Because so much of the way kids interact in the online world revolves around creating personal profiles and avatars, identity starts to take on a new meaning. Playing around with creative identities can be a safe and imaginative way for kids to explore who they are. And having an alter ego can be a real gift for a kid who's particularly shy or who fears rejection.

On the other hand, a digital identity can be a way for kids to dodge personal consequences. When kids are disguised as anonymous, they can push limits and act in ways they wouldn't in the real world. Some may explore antisocial or harmful identities – from being a thug to an anorexic. Others simply over-share and create reputations that might come back to haunt them. Either way, if there's a large gap between an online and offline identity, it can fragment a kid's sense of self (especially when the online identity gets a lot of feedback and the kid becomes dependent on it). Add in the potential of a huge audience, and kids' natural desire for attention and recognition can turn into something less than healthy – perhaps a quest for "15 minutes of fame."

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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 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 who they want to be in their online life. Is the digital identity they're creating currently how they want to be perceived? How about in 5 years? In 20 years? Remind them that they have the power to present and control their identities and reputations.