

Common Sense on Club Penguin

Some facts

- > Statistics are constantly escalating, but according to Nielson ratings, Club Penguin gets close to 4 million visits a month.
- > A parent's email address is required for account activation. (Although there's no way to verify that the address actually belongs to a parent.)
- > There are two types of chat that you can choose between during registration: Ultimate Safe Chat allows users to talk using standardized, controlled common greetings, questions, and answers. Or, kids can use Standard Safe Chat that lets users type freely. It's filtered to screen out profanity, bullying, and personal information.
- > If another penguin is mean or inappropriate, your child can hit the "ignore player" or the "report player" button.
- > Penguins are banned for 24 hours when they use inappropriate language flagged by the site's security functions.
- > Tips on how to steal and swindle coins can be found on blogs, message boards, and through YouTube video clips.

Your kid's newest friend? An orange penguin.

It's snow-covered and full of adorable penguins in bright colors. This online world is open to all kids. 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.

What is it?

Club Penguin from Disney is a hugely popular virtual world for elementary school kids. They create penguin characters (avatars) and hang out with others 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). Kids are also rewarded for time spent playing games with coins that they use to buy more stuff to send other members.

There are no ads anywhere 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 new time management features. And they are constantly upgrading parents' abilities to manage the site.

Why it matters

Every kid over 7 knows about this site and is 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 our kids spend in front of a screen is one they don'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 kid could get a mean face icon in response to "Wanna be friends?" Snowballs can also be thrown at random. And there's a big focus on earning and spending money: The more clothes and accessories, stuff for your igloo, and puffles you have, the cooler you are.

Common Sense says:

- > **Go online and check out the site.** Make sure you are comfortable with the content and style of socializing.
- > **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.
- > **Don't let your littlest ones play.** If your child is under 7, this kind of social networking and game site isn't 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.
- > **Set computer time limits.** With many layers to the Club Penguin site, it can easily become a time-consuming endeavor. 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.
- > **Talk about sharing personal information online.** OK to share online? Hobbies, favorite music, etc. Not okay is any personal identifier, or contact information (not that you can do it on Club Penguin).
- > **No sharing passwords.** Some kids give friends their passwords so they can help them play games. This means they're giving away their identity – a big no-no.
- > **Show your kid how to use the safety features.** Before your child starts, make sure he or she knows how to click on the moderator button or the ignore / block buttons to report inappropriate behavior.
- > **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.

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