

### **Weller Health Tip for Kids: Your Online Identity**

Who are you? Your best friends may think of you as silly or serious, shy or a real talker. Maybe your teachers think of you as a creative student, a good athlete, or someone who works hard or makes people laugh.

What we're talking about is your identity — the way others think of you and the way you think about yourself. Your identity can affect the decisions you make, what you decide to do and not do.

You're always you, of course, but you probably have different identities depending on the situation or who you're with. For instance, at school you might keep a quiet profile and stay out of trouble. But at home, you might be known for your practical jokes and silly side.

### **Who Are You Online?**

If you use the computer to play and talk with friends, you also have an online identity. That means you have an identity that's related to how you look, what you do, and what you say when you're using the computer. If you play on Club Penguin and put seven disco balls in your igloo, that says something.

Sites like Club Penguin and Webkinz let you create an avatar — a character that represents you. It's fun to dress up that character and maybe give it a sense of style you'd never try at school. Would you like a rainbow mohawk hairstyle? It's yours at the click of a mouse.

Avatar games, instant messaging, and chat rooms also let you choose your own screen name. If you want to be known as King\_of\_Ketchup, that's your new name. Maybe your little sister will want to be the Mayor\_of\_Mustard.

So if you start calling yourself the King of Ketchup, does that mean you really like ketchup? Should you tell your new online friends how much you love ketchup and all the foods you like to top with ketchup? That's up to you, but it brings up a good point: How much should you share about your real self online?

You may feel perfectly fine telling your best friends about your biggest crush, but what if the whole school could see your poem about your crush's beautiful eyes? What if perfect strangers could see it? Or even worse, what if, as a joke, someone pretended to be your crush and said your eyes are beautiful, too? Oh, dear.

### **Facebook and MySpace**

Maybe you have an instant messaging account or have uploaded a video on YouTube. These are two popular ways to communicate online. As you get older, you might get interested in Facebook and MySpace, two sites that are big with teens and college students. They're known as social networking sites because they let you create a group of online friends.

These sites give users the freedom to create online identities through personal web pages. With that page, users can chat, share photos, and tell people as much or as little about themselves as they'd like. Some people even report what they had for lunch! If you're thinking about creating a page on one of these sites, talk with your mom or dad first. Neither site allows users younger than 13.

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### **Online Bullying**

On Halloween it can be fun to pretend to be someone else. Maybe you're a mild-mannered kid but on Halloween you like to put on the grossest monster mask you can find. That's OK because it's just one day and everyone knows it's for fun.

When you're using the computer, it can be tempting to use a screen name as a kind of mask. It might seem fun to play a joke on someone — by teasing the person or pretending to be someone else. Or maybe you're angry with someone and it's easier to say something rude if the person doesn't know it's you.

But it's mean and hurtful to do stuff like that online. Even if you're only kidding, these jokes can make a girl or guy feel very low. It's a lonely feeling when you don't know who's messing with you. Is it someone just being funny or does the person really mean it?

Whether they are strangers or friends, try to be kind online. In other words, be a good citizen in the online world. Here's a good test: If you wouldn't say it to someone's face, don't say it to the person on the computer. And just like with regular bullying, tell a grownup if you know that someone is being hurt in this way.

### **Rules to Follow**

If you're a kid who likes to have fun and mix with friends online, here's how you can stay safe, avoid problems, and enjoy your online identity:

**Stick to safer sites.** Your parents and teachers can guide you to the best sites for you. Some sites have age restrictions, so you might be tempted to lie about your age. It's safer to tell the truth and avoid those sites until you're older. Also remember that plenty of sites let you play games and have fun without asking you to create an account. If you need an account and password, ask a parent first.

**Guard your passwords.** If someone can sign in as you, you have no control over what they do or say. And everyone will think it's you! For that reason, don't share your passwords with anyone except your parents. To keep people from guessing your password, don't pick something easy like your pet's name or your favorite team. For a truly secret password, try picking two very random nouns that have nothing to do with you (lampshadeMilk). To keep it super secret, put a number between the words (lampshade7milk). It's a good idea to change your password every couple of months.

**Limit what you share.** It's best to think first and type second when you're telling stuff about yourself online. You probably already know that you shouldn't tell a stranger where you live or give out your phone number. But you might wonder about other information — your parent's e-mail address, your favorite color, the celebrity you'd most like to meet. If you're not sure if you should share a piece of information, ask a parent.

**Remember that anything you put online or post on a site can stay online forever, even if you try to delete it.** It's easy for anyone to copy, save, and forward information online. For this reason, don't share your secrets or personal information about friends and people you know. A good guide is if you wouldn't want your entire class to know something, you shouldn't share it with anyone online.

**Don't be mean or embarrass other people online.** Just like you, there's a real person attached to that screen name who has feelings, too.

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**Always tell if you see strange or bad online behavior.** Tell an adult right away if someone says something to you that makes your uncomfortable. Also tell an adult if you see anyone bullying or saying strange stuff to other kids. Many sites have easy ways to report or flag a user who is breaking the rules. By using them, you protect yourself and other people, too.

**Be choosy about your online friends.** Some sites let kids make lots of friends with people they don't know. Some kids even compete to see who can get the most friends. But online friends are not the same as real in-person friends. Never agree to meet an online friend in person or give out personal information about yourself, such as your home address, where you go to school, or your phone number. It's dangerous because some people pretend to be kids online but actually are creepy adults.

You'll stay safer by mixing online with people you already know. To be sure you know who you're talking to, have your friends write down their screen names. Then, you'll recognize them in the online world. But will they recognize you with that rainbow mohawk?

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit [www.wellercenter.org](http://www.wellercenter.org).

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