What you need to know about...
ONLINE AVATARS

Part of our Online Identity & Self Image Series

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Online Identity & Self Image
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What are they?

'Online Avatars'

Online avatars are digital characters that look like you. They are a form of self-representation without using an actual picture. The use of online avatars is popular in online communities and on video gaming platforms. There are usually three different types of avatars found online; cartoon, anime and image avatars, which tend to be the most popular. Avatars can be a good way to protect your own child's identity online and reduce the risk from impersonation or identity theft. However, they can also be misused by other users who can use them for their own advantage.

Know the Risks

Catfishing

Catfishing is when someone pretends to be someone they are not. The 'catfisher' is usually very friendly when they first make contact and the use of an avatar can make it difficult to know who a person really is. In reality, the person may not be the gender, description or image of the avatar they choose and children could be chatting to someone much older than them.

Trolling

Trolling is a term used when someone goes out of their way to harass or bully another person. When using an avatar, a person can hide behind their true identify and troll another person without ever being found out. Trolling usually happens on social media, chat rooms, online forums and gaming platforms and children can be easy targets.

Stalking or harassment

Befriending someone on social media can lead to a child revealing a lot of their personal information. Most social media profiles will request a name, birthday, location and much more. It can be easy for someone to hide behind an avatar and use this information to stalk and harass children, causing them distress and upset.

Grooming

Online avatars can be a way for online groomers to build up a relationship with a child away from adult supervision and without revealing their true identity. This can happen in online forums or gaming communities and could lead to a desire to meet in real life once they have established enough trust.

Safety Tips

Be wary

Inform children about the dangers and encourage them to be wary of anyone that seems to be good to be true. Let children know that even if an avatar looks friendly or is based on their favourite superhero character, a stranger is behind it. Explain that they have no way of knowing who they are chatting with so they should treat them like a stranger.

Keep personal info private

Encourage children to never disclose any personal information to anyone online, especially if the person is hiding behind an avatar. Remind them that even if someone is using a photograph as their avatar, it still might not be a picture of them.

Talk openly

Keep lines of communication between you and children open so that they feel comfortable coming to you in case a stranger contacts them online. It's important that children know that they can speak to you if they are made to feel uncomfortable or approached by someone they don't know.

Change privacy settings

Spend time together looking at privacy settings of apps, gaming platforms and sites. Always assume that all settings are set to public and change them to private to restrict who is able to search for and contact your child online. Also review sites, online forums, chat groups and apps children want to use so that you can see how they work yourself and you can ensure they use them safely.

How to Respond

Record evidence

If a child admits to chatting to a stranger online and has shared personal information with them, then it's important to establish what's been shared. Try to find out as much information as you can on the nature of the relationship and on which app or chat group they met. Screenshot conversations in case it needs to be used as evidence if the police need to be involved.

Get external help & support

If a child has been adversely affected by someone using an avatar or they feel betrayed, then it may help to seek out support. This could be via local or national charities, national helplines, support from schools or professional expertise if needed.

Try to understand

It is inevitable that children will make mistakes and children may confide in a stranger online for various reasons so it's important to give them a chance to explain and to understand why and what they may be going through.

Our Expert
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Parven Kaur is social media expert and digital media consultant who is passionate about improving digital literacy for parents and children. She has extensive experience in the social media arena and is the founder of Kids N Clicks; a web resource that helps parents and children thrive in a digital world.

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