

Here's how to make the most of online communities

Online communities offer children varied opportunities for developing knowledge and interests as well as important social and communication skills.

As with most things in life, however, children need to behave appropriately, be aware of potential issues and know how to deal with them. This card gives you a quick overview...

Chat

A 'chat room' is a virtual meeting place where people can meet, discuss and share common interests – from study groups to music and more.

- Moderated chat is where a trained web person keeps an eye on what's being said.
- Children chatting without a moderator present should take extra care in who they talk to and what they talk about.

IM (instant messaging)

IM is similar to chat, but it is private, not moderated. On certain services, groups of friends ('buddies') can join in IM discussions.

- It's a quick and effective method of communicating.
- Children using IM for 1:1 chats need to be aware of the dangers of chatting with people they've only ever met online.

Messages boards, blogs and wikis

These are similar to email, but instead of sending a message to an individual, it's posted on the internet so anyone can read it.

- Great for researching and following debates on topics.
- The best sites are moderated.
- Children need to show respect in their postings.

Social learning networks

Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace help you find and make friends and communicate in creative ways with all sorts of people.

- **www.SuperClubsPlus.com** is a subscription-based social learning network suitable for primary children.
- **www.GoldStarCafe.net** is a protected online learning community for 11–14-year-olds.
- Although many sites have an age limit of 13+, many younger children lie about their age.

Virtual worlds

There are a number of virtual worlds for children, where they can create 3D characters (“avatars”) and interact with others.

- Virtual worlds can aid social, communication and negotiation skills.
- **www.clubpenguin.com** and **www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/adventurerock** are appropriate for children aged 6–14.

Cyberbullying

Bullying can occur on online spaces and by mobile phone.

- **www.thinkuknow.co.uk** has advice for parents and children on what to do about cyberbullying.
- Children need to know not to join in with anything that sets out deliberately to upset someone.

