

Pointers For Parents

The Electronic Playground

(NAPSA)—There are many places for children to “play” online—but which ones are safe, fun and more than just mindless entertainment? And how can parents tell the difference?

A cursory glance at the news yields stories of online predators and inappropriate, violent Web sites and e-mails, all available at the click of a mouse. And now children are taking playground meanness to a new level, using e-mail and Web sites to bully other kids.

There are, however, Web sites that offer a safe haven for kids eager to explore and connect with other kids.

One such electronic playground provides kids with interactive games, virtual pets and chat, as well as a virtual world in which to learn.

“It can be very overwhelming for parents who want to help their children keep up with technology, but who also want to keep them safe,” says Internet expert Jori Clarke. “But they need to know that there are sites out there that are not only appropriate for kids, but that also aim to teach them important life skills.”

While children logged on to KidsCom.com play with their Plant Baby virtual pets, they’re also learning about character traits such as patience, persistence and gratitude, as well as more traditional subjects such as geography, math and science.

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Children wanting to join must provide signed permission from a parent and all activities on the site—including the message boards and chat features—are monitored by trained adults, providing added safety.

Riley’s Monster Crunch game and the Write Me a Story activity encourage math and writing skills, respectively, while Animals of the World and the iPlanetarium are science oriented. And the site’s Idea Seekers Universe challenges kids with quests and allows them to build their own home pages.

It offers all the activities of its older online counterparts, but its content is geared specifically for kids ages 8 to 15.

“Kids naturally want to explore and do what ‘the older kids’ are doing,” adds Clarke. “KidsCom.com is an opportunity for kids to learn the safe and responsible way to communicate online, be it through chat, on message boards or on their own personal home pages.”