common sense media

What are the basic social media rules for elementary school-age kids?

Elementary school-age kids like to play in online worlds, and, for most kids in this age group, this will be the extent of their online social lives. These online worlds -- such as Club Penguin or Poptropica -- are closed environments where kids can play games, meet friends, and let their imaginations run free. One challenge for parents is helping kids find a balance between playing in these online worlds -- which can draw them in for long periods -- and enjoying plenty of offline family and social time. And, even though virtual worlds have rules about behavior, some kids can find ways around these rules, so discussing how to deal with iffy behavior ahead of time can be helpful for kids and parents.

- **Kids younger than 6 probably shouldn't play in virtual worlds.** If kids can't yet read or write, they'll be frustrated in online worlds. There are perfectly fun sites aimed at preschoolers that are more age-appropriate.
- **Set up accounts together.** By creating usernames and passwords together, you can begin walking kids through the basics of safe and appropriate online behavior.
- **If you wouldn't let your children have unsupervised play dates, don't let them go online by themselves.** Remember, the social skills they bring to online worlds are the same ones they have (or don't have) in real life.
- **Do your homework.** Make sure you check out sites before you let your kids go online, and don't settle for the most popular social sites; look around for ones that appeal to your kid's interests or have an educational angle.
- **Set time limits.** And make sure online play is balanced with offline play.
- **Establish codes of conduct.** A good rule of thumb: If your kids wouldn't say something to someone's face, they shouldn't say it online.
- **Show kids how to flag inappropriate conduct.** It's easy for parents to learn how to use the flagging feature, and it's important to show your kids how to use it, too. Explain that this is a healthy way to keep social-networking sites safe and fun for everyone.
- **Make sure your children never share their passwords.** Often kids will give other children their passwords for help in a game. Explain that giving away a password is like giving someone a part of your identity.
- **Talk about money and what it means to your family.** Some sites rely on users to buy extras. Don't let a social-networking site that needs customer loyalty to be profitable teach your kids about earning, saving, and spending. Explain your own values.
- **Keep the computer in a central place.** This will let you monitor your child's online life.