

What parents need to know about virtual reality

At National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one of many issues which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about VIRTUAL REALITY

Virtual reality (VR for short) has existed for decades, but it's only in the last 10 years that the technology has really become publicly available. With VR's rapid rise as a gaming and educational medium, there are plenty of unknowns regarding its use – for adults and children alike. Is it safe? How long should someone use VR for? How expensive is it? What's clear is that VR is becoming ever more ubiquitous in everyday life: from companies using it for training to at-home fitness. Knowing what the technology is capable of is more useful than ever.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

PREMATURE EXPOSURE

While VR has already found its way into schools worldwide – allowing teachers to take their class on digital field trips – most manufacturers advise an age restriction of 13. This safeguard is based on the idea that children's brains, eyes and bodies are still developing. With the technology still in its infancy, not enough research has been conducted as to how VR affects children in the longer term.

EYE STRAIN

One of the main worries about VR is that essentially having TV screens so close to your eyes could harm them with prolonged use. Lenses inside each headset have been specifically designed to direct the human eye into focusing at infinity (just as they would in the real world) to minimise possible eye strain. Even so, longer VR sessions should be limited to adults only.

PHYSICAL ACCIDENTS

When used correctly, VR isn't dangerous as there are safety features built in. A common concern is that a child wearing a headset could bump into real-world objects while playing. It's creating a clear, safe gaming space is essential. Headsets often come with 'guardian' or 'digital barrier' systems that can be set up beforehand indicating where walls and furniture are located so nobody trips over and hurts themselves.

SOCIAL VR

VR is more immersive than normal gaming and makes players feel very present in the moment. There are additional online safety fears, therefore, relating to trolling and abusive comments as players engage with each other in social VR spaces. Personal information shouldn't be given out and privacy and safety controls (who can see your real name, for example) need to be activated where possible.

MOTION SICKNESS

Children who are prone to travel sickness might encounter what's known as 'simulator sickness'. This is caused by the eyes seeing images which tell the brain that the person is moving, while the rest of the body knows it is stationary. Most apps have features to reduce the discomfort, while some games simply don't feature locomotion to make for a more comfortable experience.

VIOLENT CONTENT

Among the growing range of VR games and apps, not all of them are appropriate for young players. Violent content can be far more visceral and disturbing in VR, so it's important to consider the age and maturity of your child before giving them access to this type of gameplay. As the majority of VR content is digital, online store access is easy – so careful curation is advised.

Advice for Parents & Carers

START OFF SLOWLY

Just like regular video games, if your child wants to try VR the best way to reduce risks is moderation. Keep their VR sessions to short stints – and for young adults new to the technology, build up their usage time gradually (so let them get accustomed with it, if they feel any discomfort, remove the headset and try again at a later point).

NO SURPRISES

It's easy to get lost in the moment in VR – and possibly forget where you might be standing in the real world. A minimum 2m x 2m play area is recommended, with no plant pots or other delicate objects within reach of falling arms. Take pets into account, too: don't let the cat or dog walk into the room, for example, because a VR player won't see them and could certainly trip. A child is far more likely to get over-enthusiastic in VR, posing a risk to themselves and anything in their path.

KEEP A WATCHING BRIEF

It may seem that a VR player is in their own world, but all VR headsets allow external viewing via a linked monitor or mobile phone. This is the best way to ensure whatever a child is playing is appropriate. More VR supervision tools are on the way, such as securing specific apps behind unlock patterns or sending an approval notification to the parent if their child wants to purchase a game.

ANTI-NAUSEA OPTIONS

It's wise to get used to VR while comfortably seated and progress to standing or 'room-scale' VR (where players physically walk around an area) later. Look at the in-app options: switching between seated and standing adjusts the player's height, while a vignette or 'tunnel' darkens the peripheral vision to reduce nausea. Teleportation Mode and Snap Turning are also important options for enhancing comfort.

RESEARCH CONTENT

There will be information online about most games and apps, explaining what type of experience they provide. They'll list age ratings indicating how violent the gameplay might be; comfort, so you'll know the intensity of the experience; and how much access the game requires to personal information or features like the built-in microphone.

Meet Our Expert

Peter Ordom is the editor of *VR* (extended reality) and Web3 specialist site *gamed.com* and has been writing about VR, augmented reality and the immersive tech industry for more than seven years. He's served as a panel speaker and judge at awards events and game hackathons.

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Virtual reality has been around, in various rudimentary forms, since the late 1970s. After a prolonged gestation period, however, the technology's march to the mainstream has begun to gather momentum in recent years. The UK government, for example, is predicting a meteoric 78% rise in spending on VR and its stable-mate AR (augmented reality) by 2024.

The potential applications of VR in gaming and entertainment are obvious. From its longer-term physical and mental effects on users to its rules of online engagement, however, virtual reality remains an area that most of us know comparatively little about. Our #WakeUpWednesday guide this week attempts to put trusted adults in the picture about the emerging phenomenon of VR.

Less than 1% of the world's gaming population currently play in VR – but with high-end headsets like the Oculus Quest and Oculus Rift as the vanguard, the influence of virtual reality is beginning to be felt among the gaming community. Improved data transmission rates (such as faster WiFi and the advent of 5G) and a growing selection of games are also accelerating the process.

So if this change is coming – with young players likely to enthusiastically embrace fully immersive game environments – what do parents and carers need to know in advance? Our #WakeUpWednesday guide to VR highlights the potential risks, including inappropriate content, motion sickness, eye strain, physical accidents and – as ever – other people.

Please [click here](#) to download the guide