

# Your Igloo or Mine?

Web sites like Club Penguin have introduced social networking to children. Welcome to MySpace in braces.

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MyFirst MySpace: Social networking begins now?

Feb. 21, 2007 - At just 8 years old, Kevin Robson needed to undergo a bone-marrow transplant two states away from his home just outside Chicago. He had the procedure at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital, where he was kept for five months, separated from school, his peers and, for most of the time, the bulk of his family. But that didn't stop him from doing what most healthy kids his age do: he went sledding and dancing with classmates, played hockey and Connect Four with his brother and sister—all without ever leaving the clinic. He kept in touch—and interacted daily—with his friends through ClubPenguin.com, a social networking site for preteens. "It was a huge lifesaver for us," says Anne, his mom. "If he was ever feeling down or bored, it would keep him occupied for hours." By the time he came home on Valentine's Day, she estimates that most of the nearly 200 kids at his private school—from preschool up through eighth grade—had signed up with the site just to keep in touch with her son.

Club Penguin is a leader among a tidal wave of new community Web sites designed specifically for tweens and even younger kids: think of it as MySpace in braces. At Club Penguin, which launched in October 2005 and had 4 million unique visitors in January, according to comScore Media Metrix, your 8- to 14-year-old can waddle through a virtual world as a flightless waterfowl, interacting

with other penguins of her choice. Registration is free, but if junior wants to decorate her penguin's igloo or use other advanced features on the site, you'll need to pay a \$5.95 monthly membership. And Club Penguin is just the tip of the (sorry, can't resist) iceberg. A new site designed for the skinned-knee demographic seems to pop up nearly every day. Their potential market is huge: there are some 28.5 million kids between the ages of 8 and 14 in the United States, according to emarketer.com. A 2006 Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg survey found that an equal 38 percent of both male and female teens aged 12 to 14 use MySpace (even though the site's age cutoff is 14) or some other social-networking site.

The sites geared specifically for youngsters tend to fall into one of two categories. Most of them—like Club Penguin, Whyville.net (286,000 unique visitors in January) and Habbo Hotel (704,000 uniques)—are fantasy virtual worlds, reminiscent of Second Life, the three-dimensional online planet built, owned and inhabited by its 3.8 million members. Otherwise, a few networking sites for tykes are more like Imbee.com, which launched in July and already has 20,000 members despite a complete absence of advertising. Imbee resembles MySpace much more closely in that kids can create blogs, post photos and share music. Where it differs from MySpace, which has had no shortage of child-predator horror stories, is that Imbee “helps parents and kids control the scope of the publishing,” says cofounder Tim Donovan. “When you connect with friends, it's not six degrees; you're not connecting to all your friends' friends. It's point-to-point.” You can't be “friends” with anyone you're not actually friends with.

In fact, most of these sites are remarkably safe. For example, at sites like Webkinz, members can only chat by choosing from a list of the site's preexisting conversational snippets—safe but a bit stifling. Language and profanity filters at Club Penguin are so strict that one user complained of being blocked from the site for 24 hours after misspelling the breed of puppy his family had just bought—it was a Shih Tzu. Parents, after doing their due diligence, can generally rest easy: it may not be very difficult for adults to join many of these sites, but their online interaction with people they don't know in the offline world is severely curtailed.

Still, experts warn against growing too complacent. The question parents ought to ask isn't “what is my child doing online,” says David Bickham, a research scientist at The Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children's Hospital. “The question is what aren't they doing. That can be a really difficult question to answer.” Parents ought to pay attention to how much in-person socializing and outdoor playtime their children are eschewing in favor of rushing home to log on. Another concern is “cyber-bullying” and the fact that it's easy to get away with bad behavior online. Tweens “will tend to be more negative when there are no social consequences,” says Bickham, who points out that it's hard to spot such behavior on sites like Imbee—how, for example, is an administrator supposed to

know that a bunch of kids have agreed to give one of their “friends” the cold shoulder online, to simply begin ignoring her invitations to chat and play?

An entirely new set of questions is beginning to pop up now that Nickelodeon launched its own version of Second Life last month, called Nicktropolis, and Disney, the 900-pound gorilla of children’s entertainment, has begun rolling out something it calls Disney Xtreme Digital. Where does entertainment stop and advertising begin? Tweens and young teens comprise a powerful demographic that controls billions in purchasing power and represents 60 percent of Internet users under 18, according to emarketer.com. Some sites, like Club Penguin, are advertising-free—they make money strictly through membership subscriptions and promotional tie-ins. Others, like Whyville and Disney Xtreme Digital (another question to address in some future article: why must everything marketed to tweens be both “extreme” and xtremely misspelled?) are peppered with third-party advertising. Plus, at DXD kids will be able to chat, interact and create their own “channels,” roughly the equivalent of MySpace pages, tricked out with their favorite Disney characters, Disney songs, Disney video clips and Disney games—as Paul Yanover, executive vice president for Disney Online, calls it: “your own personal expression of Disney.” Nicktropolis is similarly a tad heavy-handed with the SpongeBob placement. “It’s a marketer’s dream to have kids want to come back again and again to where they’re advertised to,” says the Boston Children’s Hospital’s Bickham. “When you start mixing what they see as fun content with advertising, you have this whole other issue of exploitation.”

Clearly in the case of youngsters like Kevin Robson, whose transplant and recovery kept him out of physical reach of his peers, social-networking sites can have incalculable benefits. But, says **Anastasia Goodstein**, whose book “Totally Wired” (*St. Martin’s*), about how this generation behaves online as they begin discovering themselves, will come out in March: “It’s not just about filters or being able to see what your kids are doing online from a technical standpoint. Parents need to understand how all this stuff works. Keep the computer in a public space.” Bottom line: nothing replaces parenting.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The original version of this story included three references to Tweenland, a social networking site. In response to new concerns about the security of the site, Tweenland was taken permantly offline on Feb. 23.*