

# Homemaking: Parenting on thin ice

Saturday, November 11, 2006

By Peter McKay

For the past month or so, my kids have gathered around the computer every afternoon after school, eagerly elbowing each other to get a better view of the screen.

The first time I noticed this, I thought they'd finally put the expensive computer we'd purchased to some educational, productive use. (No I didn't. They will never put it to educational use. They'll grow up to be adults who have mastered every video game on Earth, but will scratch their heads and burp when you ask them to open up a spreadsheet. But you gotta at least hope, don't you?)

One of them clued me in that they'd all joined "Club Penguin," an online virtual world. It's a cartoon island where kids take on penguin identities and wander around and talk to each other. They never really say much. They just mill about, awkwardly bumping into each other until, every once in a while, someone dances. It's kind of like a middle school social.

The island resort features a dock, a beach, a ski village and an ice rink, which are basically just backdrops for kids to interact. You can go ice fishing, speed boat riding or sled racing, but for the most part the kids seemed to be socializing with other penguin-kids from around the world.

My 12-year-old son met a 12-year-old girl from Minnesota. After a few exchanges of brief pleasantries, they were "going together," which on Penguin Island meant that she sent him a cartoon heart signal. Their romance lasted only about 20 minutes, till my son introduced his new flame to his buddy, Carl. She instantly sent Carl a heart signal and they waddled off together, leaving my son to cool his flippers on the ice, but a little wiser about women.

I wasn't so sure about my kids being involved in all this, but I checked out the security features, and they've configured the whole thing so that nothing, really, can happen.

Last week, while out of town on a business trip, I thought of calling home to check in on the kids, then realized I could interact with them through the magic of the Internet. I pulled out my laptop, went on the Web site and got myself a penguin identity of my own, "Pops12345". When I informed the site that I was over 18, they gave my little penguin a cane to walk around with. I called my wife and told her to alert the kids that I'd meet them on their own frozen turf.

Once signed in, I found myself on the crowded main street of Penguin Town not knowing what to do. I certainly didn't want to go up and talk to any of the other little penguins, knowing they were mostly 10- to 12-year-old kids. I was afraid that if I even said hello, a little penguin Chris Hansen from Dateline NBC would come waddling over with a microphone to ask what I was doing there.

One penguin approached me and said, "Sup?" which is, I am told, kid language for "what's up?" I waddled away just to be safe.

Within a couple minutes, though, my kids were online to join me. I did all the things I normally do: I asked them whether they'd done their homework, and when soccer practice was to start. I reminded them to clean their rooms.

Somehow, though, as a cartoon penguin, I no longer had the same authority I had when I towered over them in real life. My son just laughed at me (actually, he just repeatedly typed "Tehe,

tehe, tehe, tehe") and my daughter kept making smart-alec remarks about how old I was. It was very frustrating.

After a few minutes, my kids got tired of chatting with me online, typed that I was "boring" and started lobbing snowballs at me, something I didn't even know you could do. I didn't know how to return fire, so I had to stand there awkwardly and take it. I typed "STOP IT" and "WAIT TIL I GET HOME" (All caps is shouting), but they just laughed.

Soon the other kids were joining in, lobbing snowballs till I was surrounded by a pile of them. It was like a small, frozen cartoon version of "Lord of the Flies."

After a few minutes, most of the barrage stopped, but only because my kids had found something better to do. I watched as they waddled off toward the ice rink. I figured out how to wave my little flipper, but not till they were out of sight. Some little creep kept pelting me from behind a snow fort, so I logged off.

I won't go back any time soon. The real world may not be as exciting as Penguin Island, but at least out here if one of those little creeps lobs a snowball at me, I'm big enough to wash his face with a handful of exceedingly non-virtual snow.

---

*(Homemaking is a column about the people, projects and pride that make a house a home. Peter McKay, a Ben Avon resident, is a nationally syndicated columnist with Creators Syndicate.)*