

Virtual reality headsets

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Understand the risks and get advice to help children use headsets safely.

Virtual reality (VR) headsets have become popular over recent years and you may have one already or be considering one as a gift for your child. A VR headset is a device that you wear over your eyes, like a pair of goggles. It is used to give you a 3D experience, meaning that you can see all around you in virtual reality. But what is virtual reality?¹

What is virtual reality?

Virtual reality is a computer-generated 3D world. In this world you can experience different environments like exploring an underwater world or visiting a different country, all from your own home. When you put on a VR headset, you can enter one of these environments and become part of what is happening.

You enter this virtual world by putting on the headset. This blocks out the real world and replaces it with the virtual reality world by creating life-like images and video. Everything you can see in VR moves with you to make you feel like part of the action.

There are different types of VR headset, ranging from simpler, cheaper models to more expensive, high-tech versions. These headsets all work in slightly different ways, but most come with controllers to help you guide what is happening.

The main different headsets are:

- those which have to be physically connected to a computer (or PlayStation) by cables, such as the Sony PlayStation VR and HTC Vive Pro
- headsets which can work on their own and do not need to be connected, like the Meta Quest 2
- ones which use your mobile phone as part of the headset, by simply clipping it into a slot, like the Samsung VR.

Why do young people enjoy using VR headsets?

Although virtual reality is quite a new technology and is still developing, it is becoming more popular. On Christmas Day 2021, Oculus was the most downloaded app on the Apple App Store and 15% of 5–10-year-olds have used VR, with 6% using it daily². Whilst this is quite a low percentage, these are very young children, especially considering the lower age limit for VR headsets is 12.

Here are some of the reasons they might enjoy using a VR headset:

Entertainment

Virtual reality is designed to be entertaining. The way it makes you feel like a part of everything that's happening can be exciting for young people.

Exploring different environments

In VR, you can see all sorts of different places, real or imagined. This allows young people to explore imaginary worlds or places they might not be able to get to, such as tourist destinations.

Escapism

Just like online gaming might provide stress relief, children might use VR to switch off from their everyday lives.

Connecting with others

VR can allow you to chat and game with others online and many children enjoy the social side of playing together.

Exploring their identity

Many VR games and apps allow you to create an avatar (character). You can make this character look any way you choose. Young people may use this as an opportunity to explore their identity and experiment with different looks.

Tips for keeping your family safe when using virtual reality

Make sure a VR headset is right for your family(Tab content hidden)

Play together(Tab content hidden)

Take some time to explore(Tab content hidden)

Talk to your child(Tab content hidden)

Get to know safety features(Tab content hidden)

Supervise your child's activity(Tab content hidden)

Make sure the surroundings are safe(Tab content hidden)

Set healthy boundaries(Tab content hidden)

What are the risks of using a VR headset?

VR headsets can have similar risks to devices like smart phones and tablets. Because you can use them in different ways, the risks will depend on how your child uses the device.

Many children like to use VR headsets to play games and explore different virtual places on their own. But with VR headsets you can also chat and play games online with others. You can even use a VR headset to access the metaverse. See our page on this for more information: [What is the Metaverse?](#)

Some of the risks of using a virtual reality headset are:

Experiencing physical injury

Using VR is an intense experience and using it for long periods of time could cause problems like eye strain. There is also a risk of injury while wearing a headset as your child cannot see their surroundings. If the game requires them to move around, they could trip or fall on other items in the room. Because of the way scenes move in VR, some people can feel motion sick when using it.

Negative impact on mental wellbeing

Virtual reality is designed to be very realistic. This means that young children might find it more difficult to tell the difference between what happens in the game and in reality. One side effect of using VR can be feeling disconnected from your body. Because VR is designed to be so realistic, it can feel strange when you come out of the experience. People who spend a long time in the headset might feel disconnected from their body, making them feel anxious or worried.

If your child is playing or chatting with others in VR, there are some other risks to be aware of:

Experiencing unwanted contact

Some VR apps and games allow children to easily chat and play with people they don't know. Just like in other online games, this puts young people at risk of grooming or online forms of abuse, along with the risk of moving the conversation to other platforms or meeting up offline.

In many VR games, players use avatars to represent themselves. Your child could be approached by another player's avatar whose behaviour makes them uncomfortable.

Encountering harmful content

Because many VR experiences are happening live, it can be difficult to monitor what your child is seeing and hearing. This means that children might see or hear things that are inappropriate, such as bad language, violence or sexual content.

Oversharing private information

Young people talking to others in VR might feel pressure to share information about themselves. They might share things like their name, where they go to school or photos of themselves. Some devices, games and apps might also have location settings which give the option of sharing their location with others.

Spending real money

As in other online games and apps, you can make purchases in virtual reality. Lots of apps and games partner with brands, influencers and celebrities to encourage users to buy virtual items. Young people might use virtual coins or real money to buy expensive items, such as clothes for their avatars. They could also be targeted by scammers who try to trick people into sharing personal information or steal money from them.

Reporting online safety concerns

What to do if you're worried about something a child has experienced online.

[Learn more](#)

References

1. This information and advice has been created with support from Catherine Allen at Limina Immersive.
2. Source: <https://www.theiet.org/media/press-releases/press-releases-2022/press-releases-2022-april-june/19-april-2022-generation-vr/>

