Virtual reality (VR) headsets

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.

Virtual Reality (VR) age limit

Generally speaking, VR headsets aren't suitable for children under the age of about 12-13. This is for several reasons, including physical, emotional, and developmental. Amongst other concerns, VR devices have the potential to cause eye and neck strain as well as motion sickness in users. **It is recommended to limit time spent in VR to 10-15 minutes at a time. VR can disrupt sleep, so it is best to avoid playing 1-2 hours before bedtime.**

There is also limited research into the long-term effects of VR use for young children, which is another contributing factor to age restrictions.

Age limits can differ depending on the device, so it's worth checking the packaging and the manufacturer's information before allowing your child to use a VR product.

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 this link 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. Some children believe that what they see in VR is reality and are convinced this is true and this is how real life is.

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.