

## Parents lost in cyberspace

**Ruth Ostrow**

THERE was my daughter, 11 years old, dressed up to go to the disco: make-up, hair dyed red, micro-mini and black boots. Not in real life - worse. It was a cyber disco, and she had recreated herself as the perfect cyber-babe using a program designed for teenagers.

I thought she was doing her homework, but instead she'd gone to a website which I'm not going to promote, tarted herself up, and stepped into a scene where other teenagers – and, I fear, predatory adults – hang. The cartoon characters talk to each other. The words which appear in a box above their heads are real.

I watched in horror as a male "cartoon" picked up my daughter and invited her to a special "relaxation room" which included lounge suite, refrigerator and bed.

Because she and I have a trusting, open relationship, she allowed me to observe; and then take over her persona to see where the seemingly harmless cartoon would take the meeting. Suffice to say, it was bad.

A few months before, I found her on a popular site where the aim of the game is to kill as many "smelly oldies" as possible. Bowling them over in your car, knocking them off their walking frames, bludgeoning them to death, all earns you points.

I'm a liberal thinker, but I'm at a loss to know how to deal with this situation because, like most adults, I don't know what goes on in cyberspace.

This is not about censoring kids, rather educating us as parents. Once we know what we're dealing with, we can explain the facts of life. At the moment most of us are ignorant that such sites even exist.

Our parents knew that, at worst, we might take drugs or "do it" in the back of cars. But we have no idea where our children go when they sit in their rooms doing online "homework"; nor which predators – and I include advertisers here – have access to their souls. Clever kids know how to cover their tracks, and no net nanny can ever edit the bizarre online permutations that keep emerging.

This is a cry for help. If there's anyone out there with an entrepreneurial brain, please start up regular courses for parents, teaching us about trendy new websites. Knowledge is power, and in these rapidly changing times, it may be the only weapon we have left.

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