Becta leading next generation learning

Here's how...
to make the most of online communities

Online communities offer children varied opportunities for developing knowledge and interests as well as important social and communication skills.

However, as with most things in life, children need to behave sensibly, be aware of potential risks and know how to deal with any problems. This card gives you a quick overview of online communities and how they work.

Chat

A 'chat room' is a virtual meeting place where people can meet, discuss and share common interests – from study groups to music and more.

- Moderated chat is where a trained web person keeps an eye on what's being said.
- Children chatting without a moderator present should take extra care to check who they talk to and what they talk about.

IM (instant messaging)

IM is similar to chat, but it is private, not moderated. On certain services, groups of friends ('buddies') can join in IM discussions.

- It's a quick and effective method of communicating.
- Children using IM for 1:1 chats need to be aware of the dangers of chatting with people they've only ever met online.

Message boards, blogs and wikis

These are similar to email, but instead of sending a message to an individual, it's posted on the internet so anyone can read it.

- Great for researching and following debates on topics.
- The best sites are moderated.

Social learning networks

Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace help you find and make friends and communicate in creative ways with all sorts of people.

- **www.SuperClubsPlus.com** is a subscription-based social learning network suitable for primary-age children.
- **www.GoldStarCafe.net** is a protected online learning community for 11–14 year olds.

Many sites have an age limit of 13+, but many younger children lie about their age to get on the sites.

Virtual worlds

There are a number of sites offering virtual worlds for children, where they can create 3D characters ('avatars') and interact with other characters.

Virtual worlds can improve children's social, communication and negotiation skills.

- **www.clubpenguin.com** and **www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/ adventurerock** are appropriate for children aged 6–14.

Cyberbullying:

Bullying can happen anywhere, including in online spaces and by mobile phone.

Children need to learn respect for others while online, and not to take part in anything that sets out to deliberately upset someone.

You can get advice on what to do about cyberbullying from the internet safety section of www.direct.gov.uk/parents.

Children who are victims of cyberbullying can get advice from other children at www.cybermentors.org.uk.