VR - or Virtual Reality to you and me - is the practice of creating computer generated images or sometimes even entire worlds for a user to experience as if they were there. Whereas traditionally we'd use a television screen to view these images and games, technology now allows us to simply put on a headset with much smaller screens inside and become fully immersed in these new worlds. While virtual reality is perfectly safe on the whole (although sometimes you might feel like you're in real, physical danger) there are some things to look out for if you plan on giving it a try.

AGE RECOMMENDATION
13+

What parents need to know about VIRTUAL REALITY

IS VR SAFE FOR CHILDREN?

Broadly speaking, VR is safe. The technology being used is so young however, that we don't fully understand the long term repercussions of using it just yet, if indeed there are any. Because of this, it can be hard to know how much screen time is too much and what games and experiences are going to be okay for children. Thankfully, there are a whole host of interesting and educational applications that we can be pretty confident using. Things like 3D art games and sports/activity apps can be a unique way to experience endeavours that might be otherwise difficult to pursue.

IS MY HOME VR READY?

The first big question to ask is 'do I have enough space?' Most modern VR headsets will require an area of clear floor space to work so you can walk around a little, move your arms and generally explore. How much space you need is a matter of which headset you have and what you're using it for, but generally speaking the absolute minimum you'll want is about 5 or 6 feet cubed which will allow you to turn and move your arms without venturing too far. Naturally you'll want to also make sure there are no pieces of furniture or precious ornaments within swinging distance as stubbed toes and broken vases are no joke!

THE EQUIPMENT YOU NEED

Many VR kits come with a dizzying selection of bells and whistles which can seem quite daunting at first, but all you strictly need is a headset with a screen and a headband. While the minimalists will be able to enjoy a virtual tour of an aquarium or a safari, many games will need you to incorporate controllers or headphones to really get the most out of it. Thankfully, the majority of VR kits include a headset, any wires you'll need to connect it to your home entertainment device, some basic headphones and special controllers. Some may also come with sensors which you'll be required to place at the corners of play area so it knows how much room you have.

OPTIONS AVAILABLE

The headset you buy will depend on what you're looking to use VR for and your price range. Many headsets are age restricted. For example the Oculus Rift and Samsung VR carry an age gate of 13+, the PlayStation VR is for 12 and over, while HTC Vive specifies that it is not for young children at all. Nintendo LABO is for 6 and up, while the low-tech Google Cardboard doesn't carry an age warning at all. Each of them offer their own unique perks and pitfalls so if you're unsure, a cheap headset that can be used with your phone and some downloaded apps is a good place to start.

ONLINE FEATURES

As with normal consoles, some VR games will have a multiplayer portion. Anybody with a headset and the game will be able to play with each other online, and not all games will carry a robust safety system. If you know your child is using a game that can be played online, be sure to check on its safety features.

IS VIRTUAL REALITY THE SAME AS AUGMENTED REALITY?

AR
VR

Not to be confused with virtual reality, augmented reality - or AR - superimposes a computer generated image into the real world and doesn't require a headset. Games and apps like Pokemon GO or the upcoming Minecraft Earth use this technology to make it seem like something fictional is on the screen in front of you. This is usually achieved on a mobile phone screen, but the technology already exists to use things like tables, mirrors and other household objects.

Top Tips For Parents

VR CHAT GAMES

Some games involve a sort of online, VR chat room where you can talk to other people all around the world, with the most popular among these being VRChat. VRChat uses a fairly good Trust and Safety System, that goes some way to protecting against nuisance users or profiles. Do make sure you read up on how these systems work before letting a child use them, especially if it's another chat game you're not familiar with.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

VR can be a rather disorienting experience at first and some people may begin to feel nauseous or uncomfortable after an extended period of play as their brain struggles to understand its new digital surroundings. This is known as 'Virtual Reality Sickness.' Although quite common, it's important to stop once these feelings arise. If you, a family member or friend have any underlying health issues too, it may be wise to consider if VR is the right option as it could put unknown stresses and strains on the body.

ENFORCE BREAKS

As mentioned, VR can be a disorienting experience that does take some getting used to. Committing to regular breaks (every 15-30 minutes or so) will hopefully stop VR sickness from setting in.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY IT YOURSELF

The beautiful thing about virtual reality is that it's not just used for gaming. You can discover untold treasures from across the world or try your hand at painting a masterpiece, all from the comfort of your own home. Having a good understanding of how everything works will enable you to enjoy it alongside your child and while new technology can be daunting, it can also be incredible to experience. By and large, it's much easier to get to grips with VR games than regular ones because you're the controller!

ALWAYS SUPERVISE INTERACTION TIMES

VR is not like a normal games console as essentially you're running around blindfold from the real, physical world. Tripping, breaking and falling into things can all occur if you're not careful. Make sure you're keeping a watchful eye on what's happening without getting in the way yourself. Nothing says 'I get too close to somebody playing VR' like an unintentional bump on the head.

Meet our expert

Mark Foster has worked in the gaming industry for 5 years as a writer, editor and presenter. He is the current gaming editor of two of the biggest gaming news sites in the world, UNILAD Gaming and GAMINGbible. Starting gaming from a young age with his siblings, he has a passion for understanding how games and tech work, but more importantly, how to make them safe and fun.

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