

Notes for educators

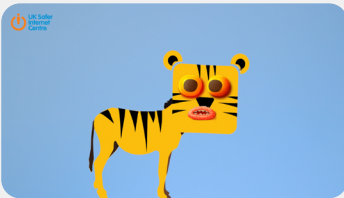
The [Safer Internet Day 2020 film for 7-11-year-olds](#) provides many opportunities for discussions with learners around online safety, online identity and representation online.

This resource provides some prompt questions and suggestions to guide a discussion after watching the film with learners.

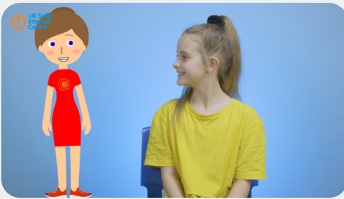
*Note: The discussions resulting from watching this film may include sensitive subjects. The **'Establishing a safe and supportive learning environment'** document in the Safer Internet Day 2020 Education Packs provides advice on how to set ground rules and establish a safe space for learners to discuss online issues that are relevant to them.*

Film theme – Expressing your online identity through avatars

Avatar - an icon or image to represent a user online on social media, in video games or other services. (Education for a Connected World, UKCIS)



This film explores the choices that children make when choosing to express themselves online through the form of an avatar. Many popular online games and services used by 5 to 11-year-olds allow them to create a character or a virtual representation of themselves. Avatars provide freedom to create a form that closely resembles your true appearance, a form that looks wildly different to you or even to create a form that cannot exist in the offline world (e.g. a 'tonkey'! (1:05-1:16 in the film))



Creating and using an avatar provides children with the opportunity to express their identity in different ways online. It may allow opportunities to accentuate aspects of their personality, or communicate their hobbies, likes and interests to others. It also offers opportunity to share or protect personal information, depending on the form an avatar takes.

Key questions

Before watching the film:

'What does online identity mean to you?'

Prompt questions:

- What is identity?
- What do you like to do online? Is this part of who you are?
- How do you express yourself online – is it different to how you express yourself offline?

Before watching the film, you may wish to ask learners this key question about online identity to explore their concept of identity and how it may relate to online environments. Encourage them to share their favourite activities online and query whether these reflect who they are as a person.

The prompt question about online expression may bring up the concept of avatars, providing a way into introducing the film.

After watching the film:

'Do you use avatars online?'

Prompt questions:

- On which games/apps/services do you use avatars?

Be yourself, show what you love, your opinion.

Primary learner, Wales*

- Can you describe your avatar?
- (If some learners do not use avatars) Can you explain why you don't use avatars?

Answers may include: Not liking them/being interested in them, using services that favour photo and video, playing games that do not allow customisation of a character, etc.

Asking learners about where and how they use avatars online can provide insight into their online activities and current favourite games/services. It also provides opportunity for learners to share their own personal avatars. If time allows, you could ask learners to draw their favourite avatar using **Appendix 1**, and complete the questions about online identity.

'Which was your favourite avatar, and why?'

Ask learners to share their favourite avatar from the film and reasons for their choice. You may wish to draw attention to some avatars as examples of expression, creativity and demonstrating difference.

'How can avatars help us express who we are?'

Prompt questions:

- What does/do your avatar(s) express about you online?
- Do you use the same type/style of avatar across different apps/games? Why/why not?
- Do you ever change/update an avatar? Why/why not?

Ask learners to consider ways that an avatar can express aspects of a personality or identity – e.g. hobbies, likes, interests, strong personality traits such as friendliness, physical appearance and attributes (including gender). Some learners may express a strong preference for using avatars to adopt or experiment with different identities (e.g. at 0:15 in the film there is an avatar that represents a popular cartoon character, chosen because he is from the child's favourite show).

Discuss with learners the freedom they have to use different avatars on different games/apps. Is this down to restrictions in the game (e.g. different games have different avatar/character creators that limit the choices available) or because they prefer to use different avatars for different social groups/interactions? How and why do learners change their avatars (e.g. to keep up with latest trends in a game, to show a change in their like/preferences, to adopt an appearance to show support for a national or international event, etc.)

Note: Depending on the experiences of learners, some may raise points about the difference in treatment of female gamers to male games – [research by MacLean, L & Griffiths, M \(2018\)](#) suggests that female gamers are more frequently harassed online and often choose to hide their true identity (by turning off voice chat or using a non-female avatar) as a coping strategy. This may lead to further discussion about the different ways that people are treated online.

'How can avatars be used to keep us safe online?'

Prompt questions:

- What reveals more personal information about you – your photo or your avatar? Why?
- Can being different online (to who you are offline) be a positive thing? Why/why not?
- Do you ever feel pressured to make your avatar look a certain way in a game/app? Why/why not?

Online identity means that you can be yourself and talk about stuff online without being worried about your friends knowing it's you.

Primary learner, Scotland*

Discuss with learners how avatars can be an effective way of expressing who we are online without having to display our true appearance or other information about us e.g. an avatar wearing a sports kit for the national team can share the country we live in without giving away our exact location.

Discuss with learners how avatars can be an effective way of expressing who we are online without having to display our true appearance or other information about us e.g. an avatar wearing a sports kit for the national

team can share the country we live in without giving away our exact location.

Remind learners that other people in online games/apps may use an avatar's appearance as a way to strike up a conversation or ask questions (e.g. an avatar holding a tennis racquet (1:52 in the film) could lead to questions about whether that person plays tennis, which local club they belong to, whether they play for their school (and what the name of the school is), etc.). They should think carefully when talking to people they don't know online and keep their personal information safe by not revealing specific details when asked.

For some learners, adopting a different identity online can be a liberating experience that allows them to explore different types of behaviour or discuss more sensitive topics or issues freely because they cannot be easily identified. For those who may experience offline pressure to conform or act in a particular way, online identities may provide the freedom to be 'themselves'.

Depending on learners' experiences, you might also discuss any pressures in online games/apps for an avatar to appear or behave a certain way. In some popular online games, an avatar using the default costumes/appearance may be treated as a 'newbie' or 'n00b' (new, inexperienced player). In some gaming communities more experienced players may mentor and support new players but in other communities someone using the default appearance may be verbally abused or excluded. This can lead to pressure on children to keep up to date with the latest fashion trend in a game (often through in-app purchases using real money) or to limit their perceived freedom in how they make and maintain their avatar.

Remind learners that they should always report abusive users to the game/app provider (often by using a 'report abuse' button), block/mute abusive users and never retaliate. They should also tell a trusted adult about what has happened so they can be supported.

**Quotes taken from Safer Internet Day 2020 workshops prior to filming.*

Appendix 1

My favourite avatar

Use the space below to draw/show your favourite online avatar, or create a brand new one!

What does your avatar say about you?

How can your avatar help you stay safe online?