



## What to Know

Whether designing avatars for virtual worlds, selecting profile pictures, or carefully crafting texts to friends, young people have countless opportunities to express themselves through digital media. On the one hand, playing around with creative identities can be a safe and imaginative way for kids to explore who they are. Having a "different" persona online can also be a real gift for a kid who's particularly shy. On the other hand, a digital identity can be a way for kids to dodge personal consequences. When kids are disguised as anonymous, they can push limits and act in ways they wouldn't in the real world. Some may explore antisocial or harmful identities. Others simply overshare and create reputations that might come back to haunt them. Either way, if there's a large gap between an online and offline identity, it can fragment a kid's sense of self (especially when the online identity gets a lot of feedback and the kid becomes dependent on it).

## Why Teach It

Help your students ...

- **understand** the similarities and differences in how they present themselves online and offline.
- **reflect** on how the Internet allows for anonymity and deception, and explore how this can affect their behavior online.
- **consider** the motivations, benefits, or possible harm to oneself and others when assuming an online identity that's different than one's real self.

Help your students consider how their identities – online or offline – may affect their relationships, sense of self, and reputation. Give them opportunities to teach *you* about the websites and apps they use most, as well as describe any unspoken rules about communication in these spaces. By setting the tone for an open dialogue, you can then steer discussions to address the benefits and risks of online self-expression. Talk to them about anonymity and why it's important to be responsible for their actions even when they aren't easily identifiable. Work with students' families to help communicate to them why identities grounded in hatred, violence, illegal activities, or risky sexual behavior should be avoided entirely. With this whole-community approach, students can learn to habitually reflect on how they can present themselves online in positive and beneficial ways.

## Key Vocabulary

**avatar:** an image or character that represents a person online

**anonymous:** without a name or other information that identifies who you are

**double standard:** a rule that is unfairly applied to different people or groups of people

**ethics:** a set of principles and morals governing people's behavior, including honesty and respect toward others

**gender code:** unspoken rules and expectations about acting "masculine" or "feminine"

**identity:** all of the factors that make up who you are

**image:** the way someone or something is perceived by others

**inhibited:** careful or restrained about your actions or impulses

**persona:** an image and personality that you show to others

**stereotype:** a popular belief about a group of people, based on assumptions that are often extreme and inaccurate

"People are really more free to be themselves or what they actually want to be. So, I've sort of learned how people reacted to certain things I say and sort of built myself around it."

15-year-old boy