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USE THE WORLDWIDE WEB TO GO GREEN

Kids, want to learn how you can have a blast on the Internet and help curb global warming at the same time? Read on.

By Alison Snyder
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C'mon, admit it: You love playing games and talking to friends on the Internet.

You're on Club Penguin, and you have your own Webkinz. Your little sister complains that she never gets a turn at the game, and it always seems that Mom kicks you off just when you have almost enough virtual money to buy clothes or deck out your igloo.

Here's a good excuse for next time: I'm learning how to fight global warming!

There are many ways you can use your love of playing games on the Web to find out how to make a real difference in the world. Kids around the United States and in other countries are having a blast online as they learn about ways they may be able to help slow global warming.

Climate change, a shift in global temperatures, happens naturally. But in the past few decades, humans have been speeding up this process by increasing the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere. We add CO₂ to the air when we use electricity or go places in cars.

Carbon dioxide is called a "greenhouse gas" because it traps heat in the atmosphere – much like a greenhouse captures warmth inside it. The higher levels of CO₂ are slowly but surely raising earth's average surface temperatures. This temperature increase is also known as global warming, and the consequences of the phenomenon will alter the world as we know it.

"We now know that by changing the atmosphere in that way, we're going to change the whole climate system of the whole earth, and that's going to affect billions of people," says G. Michael Purdy, who is the director of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University in New York City.

Scientists predict that global warming could affect the planet in several ways, including:

- Oceans could become more acidic because when CO₂ dissolves in seawater, it forms carbonic acid. The extra acidity would have an impact on most ocean life.
- Sea levels are likely to rise as ice in polar regions melts. The added water could, over several centuries, swamp coastal cities.
- Droughts, floods, hurricanes, and other storms may occur more often and could last longer or be stronger, some scientists say.
- Some of the habitats where animals live will change, and because of this, some species might become extinct.

If these changes occur, they won't be things we just watch on TV. They will affect everyone in ways we'll all notice.

"[Kids are] going to start seeing the impact on [their] own neighborhoods as weather patterns change," says Jorian Clarke, who is founder and president of the website KidsCom.com. "We've already seen in just the past two years floods and forest fires that impact kids [whose homes and neighborhoods were damaged]."

•GOING GREEN WITH TECHNOLOGY

KidsCom.com gives kids an opportunity to learn more about climate change while playing games, taking care of a virtual pet, and making new friends. The site also has a virtual world where you can become an "Idea Seeker" and set out with your friends to planets in a virtual universe in a series of team challenges.

The next one will be about how another planet solved a water supply problem similar to Earth's.

The game that just finished was a "carbon cycle challenge." On the planet Sarillion, a grayish-yellow haze hung over the city of Kapokville. Participants had to do the research to discover the cause of the haze. Did new factories and skyrocketing population have something to do with it?

The three winners of this challenge (and their parents) got to hang out with Dr. Purdy and other scientists in New York City on Oct. 5 to 7. They went behind the scenes at the Earth Observatory's laboratories, got a special tour of the Bronx Zoo, and met with architects who design earth-friendly buildings.

But KidsCom.com isn't the only website where you can have fun and make a difference.

You can check out what kids in Canada and India are doing about climate change at Ekokids and Edugreen. The US Environmental Protection Agency has two kids' websites – one about the environment in general and one that's all about climate change. Both have games, interactive stories, and links to other interesting websites.

In addition to games, a website called "The Greens" has videos and even a blog about environmental issues.

Not only is the Internet a fun way to learn about global warming, but you can also use the technology to spread the word about it.

Last school year, students in a fourth-grade class taught by Ted Wells at the Park School in Brookline, Mass., created their own website to help teach people how to take care of the environment. The temporary site had essays, poems, cartoons, and even movies the class made to encourage people to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

"We brainstormed ways to get the world to recycle, and half the class wanted to make a movie," says Jamie, the student who ran the class website. "So we just brainstormed the plot. It was really fun. We broke into groups, we pieced it all together, wrote a script, and kind of ad-libbed it along the way." This movie introduced the character of Recycling Boy, a Superman-like hero who is now famous at the Park School.

Jamie says that technology such as computers, websites, and especially games could really help kids learn about the environment, especially because they are available from anywhere.

"If every single kid in the world would go to those kinds of websites, it would really help society," he says.

•EARTH-FRIENDLY DEEDS TO DO OFFLINE

Recycling is a great way to start aiding the earth. In many cases, it takes less energy to produce recycled products than it does to make new ones. Less energy used means fewer carbon-dioxide emissions. (Electricity is often produced by burning fossil fuels, which releases carbon dioxide into the air.)

There are other things you can do to help, too. Turning down the heat or air conditioning at night saves energy. Turning off the faucet when you brush your teeth saves clean water (it takes energy to make dirty water clean again). And planting a tree in your backyard will help take CO₂ out of the air because trees absorb this gas. (Trees also produce oxygen, which we all need to breathe.)

Mr. Wells's class had a chart where students marked their "good green deeds" such as taking shorter showers, carpooling, or walking instead of riding in a car.

The class also started a recycling program. Last year the students collected between 600 and 800 pounds of paper every week and between 300 and 400 bottles and cans.

The sky is the limit. You can think of your own ways to save electricity and decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

"It's really simple," Jamie says. "Kids can reduce, reuse, and recycle. They can start their own environmental program. They can start a club to write letters to the president about the environment."

He suggests that kids start talking to people about global warming. "I think kids would have some pretty good ideas," he says.

•MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Kids should understand the effect they can have on the world. "Having kids realize that speaking up for things they care about is important," Mr. Wells says. "Kids should feel that power and know they're allowed to have that voice in [a] democracy."

In April, more than 100 kids from the Park School, including half of Mr. Wells's class, attended a rally to ask the US Congress to do more to cut the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

"Global warming isn't going to affect just the grown-ups; it's going to affect everyone," Jaime says. "Kids live in this world, too. We should have the right to speak up."

Dr. Purdy from the Earth Observatory says that one important thing students can do to help slow climate change is to alter the way their families think about it.

"Society is able to change its ways, and kids can really impact their parents and really impact their families," he says. You can help your family learn about the environment by telling them what you have learned.

Why not start now with small things and encourage both adults and other kids to do them, too? Little by little, you can do more to fight global warming and be a positive force for change. See next Tuesday's Kidspace for more ideas.

ENVIRONMENTAL WEBSITES FOR KIDS

www.ecokids.ca

www.edugreen.teri.res.in

www.epa.gov/kids

www.epa.gov/climatechange/kids/index.html

www.meetthegreens.org

www.pbskids.org/eekoworld

www.kidscom.com

www.globalwarmingchallenge.org

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