

ONLINE GAMING:
An introduction for parents and carers

1: An introduction to online gaming

Online gaming is hugely popular with children and young people. Annual research conducted by OFCOM shows that gaming is still one of the top activities enjoyed by 5-16 year olds online, with many of them gaming via mobile devices and going online using their games console.

From sport related games to mission based games and quests inspiring users to complete challenges, interactive games cater for a wide range of interests, and can enable users to link up and play together.

Most games now have an online element to them; allowing users to take part in leader boards, join group games or chat to others. Internet connectivity in a game adds a new opportunity for gamers as it allows players to find and play against, or with, other players. These may be their friends or family members or even other users in the game from around the world (in a multi-player game).

We know that parents and carers do have questions and concerns about games, often about the type of games their child plays, who they may be speaking to and for how much time their child is playing.

This leaflet provides an introduction to online gaming and advice for parents specifically related to gaming.

2: Online gaming: how and where to play

There are many ways for users to play games online. This includes free games found on the internet, games on smartphones, tablets and handheld consoles, as well as downloadable and boxed games on PCs and consoles such as the PlayStation, Nintendo Wii or Xbox. Here are some of the most common devices on which online games are played.

Consoles: These games are played on home entertainment consoles designed to work with a TV. Consoles are capable of connecting to the internet via a home network just like other devices. This allows users to purchase and download games, purchase additional content for games (eg extra levels, characters, features) as well as playing online, although a subscription may be required to use a particular gaming network. The main manufacturers (Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft) include parental controls in their consoles that are linked to age ratings systems (FAQ 3).

Mobile App Games: Mobile games can be free or chargeable and are downloadable through app stores like Google Play or Apple App Store. There may be costs associated with mobile gaming as within some games, even free ones, there are opportunities to purchase added functionality such as 'in-app' purchases. However, these functions can be deactivated, either through settings on a device or via settings on an account used to access the app store.

Handheld Games: Handheld games are played on small portable consoles. As with other devices, handheld games are also internet enabled. This allows gamers to download games, purchase additional content, get new features and play and chat to other gamers.

Web Games: Some games are accessed through unique websites hosting hundreds of different games. Many of these games are free of charge online, although some may have paid-for components. These sites have become hugely popular with many young people as they often offer a creative element which allows a user to create their own games.

PC Games: These games are played on a computer the same way as other software programmes. There are also a large number of 'free games' available to download and play that offer limited features with an option to buy extra features or unlock all features via a monthly subscription. Many PC games make use of the internet, and many 'Massively Multiplayer Online' (MMO) games, where gamers interact together in virtual spaces, are PC games.

Augmented Reality (AR): This is an element of games where a live view of the real-world environment is altered to include moveable graphics allowing players to experience digital game play in the real world. It is usually achieved by using the camera on a mobile device and can be seen in games like Pokémon Go where Pokémons appear to be actually stood in front of you.

Virtual Reality (VR): This is immersive wearable technology which creates environments and allows you to explore them as if you are actually there. Experiences can vary but most contain sensors which allow you to mimic your movements in the virtual world. This is usually achieved through wearing headsets, which range in terms of price and experience. Inexpensive cardboard structures have also been developed which allow you to turn your smart phone into a VR headset by downloading an app. Manufacturers are currently recommending that under 12s are to be supervised by an adult when using a VR headset.

3: Online gaming, the risks

Internet safety advice is directly applicable to the games environment because risks of **Content, Contact, Conduct** and **Commercialism** also apply to games.

C **Content:** inappropriate material is available to children online.

The quality of graphics in many games is very sophisticated and realistic. Some games might not be suitable for your child's age as they might contain violent or sexually-explicit content or scenes intended to invoke horror or fear.

C **Contact:** potential contact from someone online who may wish to bully or abuse them.

If your child takes part in multiplayer games on the internet (where they play against other people, potentially from all around the world) they might be at risk of hearing offensive language from other players, being bullied, or making themselves vulnerable to contact by those with a sexual interest in children if they give out their personal details. Bullying on games is known as 'griefing'. This is when players single out others specifically to make their gaming experience less enjoyable by sending hurtful messages or destroying parts of their gaming world.

C **Conduct:** children may be at risk because of their own and others' online behaviour, such as the personal information they make public.

Specific conduct risks for gamers include excessive gaming use to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. This is sometimes referred to as 'addiction'. Some websites might not have the game owner's permission to offer a game as a download i.e. copyright infringement, the same as for music and film, and by downloading it the user might be breaking the law.

C **Commercialism:** young people's privacy can be invaded by aggressive advertising and marketing schemes.

Children and young people can get themselves into difficulty by inadvertently running up bills when playing games online. Some online games offer enticing 'in app' purchases, eg buying more lives or gems to complete a level.

4: Online gaming, Top-tips

» It may seem daunting, but one of the best things you can do is to engage with the gaming environment and begin to understand what makes it is so attractive to young people as well as the types of activities that they enjoy! If you're not sure what they are, ask them to show you how they play and have a go yourself.

» Read game reviews to understand more about potential risks or difficulties other players have experienced and content they have seen. App store and Google Play offer reviews but you can also find app reviews on www.net-aware.org.uk or game reviews on www.commonsensemedia.org.

» Some games may offer children the chance to chat with other players by voice and text. Ask them who they are playing with and find out if they are talking to other players. If chat is available, look at the type of language that is used by other players.

» Remember that much of the chat within games can be simply about the game itself and different strategies. Speak to your children about never revealing personal information or agreeing to meet up offline.

» Remember that the same safety rules for going online apply to playing games on the internet. Familiarise yourself with the **SMART rules**, and encourage your children to do so as well.

5: SMART rules

S **Safe:** Keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information when playing online. This includes your e-mail address, phone number and password, as well as images and videos of yourself, friends and family

M **Meeting:** Meeting someone you have only known online can be dangerous. Remember that no matter how long you have spoken to someone for, or how nice they are, if you have never met this person before then they are still a stranger. If anyone asks to meet up then tell an adult immediately.

A **Accepting:** Accepting gaming requests, direct messages or clicking on links from people you don't know can lead to problems – they may contain viruses, inappropriate content or nasty messages!

R **Reliable:** People we speak to online might not always be who they say they are as it is very easy to give away false information online. Try to only speak to your friends and family.

T **Tell:** Tell your parent, carer or a trusted adult if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried, or if you or someone you know is being bullied online.

6: Online gaming, FAQs

1. How can I keep my child safe whilst they chat in games? What tools are available to help?

Many games offer users the ability to chat with other gamers during the game. Players can communicate by typing messages which can be seen by all players or by sending private messages to just one player. Some games also allow users to chat using a headset which is similar to talking on the phone.

Parental control tools are available on PCs and consoles, and these can limit gameplay functionality, including chat. Make sure your children know how to protect their privacy by locking down privacy features. These could include using a voice mask to disguise their voice in a multiplayer game as well as how to block and report other players and use the mute function which can disable chat in many games.

Advise them never to give out any personal information (including pictures of themselves) or agree to meet someone in person when using online chats or sharing information in their user profile. Encourage your child to use an appropriate screen or character name (sometimes called gamertags) that follow the rules of the game service.

In addition, many gamers chat on community forums about the games they are playing. Gamers use these sites to exchange information about the games as well as to provide tips and hints to others. It is important to encourage your child to be positive and respectful as well as manage their privacy on these sites too and locate the means for reporting any issues they encounter.

2. How do I know which games are appropriate or suitable for my child?

The Pan European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system exists to help parents make informed decisions when buying or downloading games, similar to the BBFC ratings for films. The rating on a game confirms that it is suitable for players over a certain age, but is not indicative of the level of difficulty. PEGI age labels appear on the front and back of games packaging, on sites and services that sell games online and on some app stores (such as Google Play and the Windows Apps store).

Additional 'descriptors' shown on the back of the packaging indicate the main reasons why a game has received a particular age rating. Encourage your child to only access online games that are appropriate and always check the age rating on any game before buying it for your child, as well as considering whether it has an online component. Remember most games will have an online element to them which may not be apparent from the game packaging or description.



3. Do games have parental controls?

Lots of games have safety or privacy features to keep young gamers safe which you can set based on your child's age and maturity. These settings may limit who players can chat with or what they can say. These features may also control the game content they can play. Games and services will approach privacy and safety in a variety of ways so it is worth getting to know the features on the games your child plays. However, these controls aren't a substitute for parental involvement. You can find out more information about how to set up the parental controls on each device by visiting www.saferinternet.org.uk/parent-tech.

4. How can I report inappropriate behaviour by other users?

Sadly cyberbullying can occur in online games. If your child is being harassed by another player on a game, follow the game's reporting guide to report this behaviour or visit www.childnet.com/resources/how-to-make-a-report. Inappropriate behaviour can also be reported to the moderator on a moderated game and in many instances you can contact the customer support team for further assistance. If your child does encounter inappropriate behaviour in an online game, encourage them to block that user.
If you are suspicious that another player is wishing to meet up with your child, or asking them to share personal information or images and videos of themselves, then you can report them to the police at www.ceop.police.uk.

5. How long should I let my child play games for?

Consider what is appropriate for the users in your house and their gaming needs. This may depend on the type of game they are playing, as quest based games for example are unlikely to be completed within 30 minutes.

Agree together rules of playing games online, which as well as covering safety considerations could include play time limits. You may find it more appropriate to set a weekly quota for their internet use or to agree that certain games should only be played at a weekend. UKIE, the body that represents the interactive entertainment industry in the UK recommends that all games should form part of a healthy and balanced lifestyle and as a guide games players should take five minute breaks every 45 – 60 minutes.

You could use our Family Agreement as a way of structuring these rules, which can be found at www.childnet.com/resources/family-agreement

6. What else should I consider?

As well as staying safe when playing online games, it's also important to stay legal. It may be tempting to download cheat programmes to skip to a higher level, but these, and downloading games for free (and infringing copyright), can expose users to unsuitable content and viruses affecting your devices.

UK Safer Internet Centre
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7: Support and information

Childnet resources and websites

Childnet: Childnet International is a non-profit organisation working in partnership with others around the world to help make the internet a great and safe place for children. The Childnet website hosts all the online resources detailed below, as well as a number of recommended resources for young people, parents, carers and teachers. www.childnet.com

UK Safer Internet Centre: Childnet is part of the European Commission appointed UK Safer Internet Centre. Together with partners the **Internet Watch Foundation** and the **South West Grid for Learning**, we raise awareness about internet safety, develop information materials and resources and organise high profile events such as Safer Internet Day. You can access a range of resources from across the UK, Europe and wider afield at www.saferinternet.org.uk/parents.



Need help? Information about what to do if a child comes to you for help and advice about how to report online concerns such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content or illegal behaviour. www.childnet.com/parents-help

Information and tools for parents and carers



Parents' Guide to Technology: The UK Safer Internet Centre has created this guide to answer commonly asked questions and introduce some of the most popular devices used by children, highlighting the safety tools available and empowering parents with the knowledge they need to support their children to use these technologies safely and responsibly. www.saferinternet.org.uk/parent-tech



Safety Tools on Social Networks and Other Online Services: Information and advice on the safety tools, age requirements and terms and conditions for a variety of online services popular with young people. www.saferinternet.org.uk/safety-tools

NetAware: NSPCC and O2 have created a guide with information and advice for parents and carers on the most popular social networks and interactive apps and games used by children and young people. The information is also available in an app for Apple and Android devices. www.net-aware.org.uk

GET IT ON Google Play

Download on the App Store

Common Sense Media: A US non-profit organisation that provides independent reviews, age ratings and other information about movies, games, apps, TV shows, websites, books and music for families and children. www.commonsensemedia.org

Online gaming



Childnet's gaming hot topic: On our website you can access hot topics on a range of issues, including online gaming. The Parents and Carers area also contains key advice, information on reporting and on setting up a family agreement www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/hot-topics/gaming

Ask About Games: Information and advice for parents and gamers about the PEGI age rating system for video games and how to play games responsibly and safely. www.askaboutgames.com

UKIE: The Association for UK interactive entertainment (UKIE) is a trade body for the UK's games and interactive entertainment industry. They offer advice about how to play games safely and sensibly from the 'playsafe' area of their website. www.ukie.info/playsafe

PEGI: Visit the Pan European Game Information website to find out more about age ratings and content descriptors used on the packaging of games and in app stores when downloading games. www.pegi.info/en/

Where to report

Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP): A police agency tackling child abuse on the internet. This website includes a unique facility that enables parents and young people to make reports of actual or attempted abuse online. www.ceop.police.uk

CEOP's **Think U Know** website contains information for children and parents, as well as a link for children to report abuse online. www.thinkuknow.co.uk

ParentPort: A website run by the UK's media regulators, allowing you to report content unsuitable for children found in a programme, advert, film, video game, newspaper/magazine or other forms of media. www.parentport.org.uk