ONLINE GAMING:
An introduction for parents and carers

Childnet International

1: Online gaming, an introduction

Online gaming is hugely popular with children and young people. Recent research shows that gaming is one of the top activities enjoyed by 9-16 year olds online, with gaming more popular than social networking.

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.

Games can provide a fun and social form of entertainment often encouraging teamwork and cooperation when played with others.

Just like offline games, they can have educational benefits, and be used, for example, to develop skills and understanding.

Traditionally, games could be bought from shops, often in the form of a disk for use on a PC or console. Now, games can also be downloaded online. Games are played on many platforms, with those bought in shops often having an online component to them.

Internet connectivity in a game adds a new opportunity for gamers as it allows players to find and play against, or with, other players 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, and for how much time their child is playing.

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

2: Online gaming, where and how?

There are many ways for users to play games online. This includes free games found on the internet, games on mobile phones and handheld consoles, as well as downloadable and boxed games on PCs and consoles such as the PlayStation, Nintendo Wii or Xbox.

Some of the most common devices on which online games are played are listed below.

Consoles: These games are played on home entertainment consoles designed to work with a TV. Games for consoles are mostly boxed products bought in shops and also online, containing a game disc and usually a manual. According to Ofcom, nearly three quarters of children aged eight and over, have a games console, in their bedroom. Consoles like these are capable of connecting to the internet via a home network just like other computers. This allows users to download games or 'expansions' to existing games as well as playing online, although a subscription may be required for this. All of the three main manufacturers (Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft) include parental control functions in their consoles that are linked to age ratings systems (FAQ 2).

PC Games: These games are played on a personal computer the same way as other software programmes. They can be bought from shops or purchased and downloaded directly from the internet. 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.

Web Games and Applications (apps): Some games are accessed through a unique website, and there are also websites hosting hundreds of different games. Many of these games are free of charge online, although some may have paid-for components. Applications can be accessed through, and downloaded to, social networking profiles which allow users to play games on their profile as well as enabling them to play games with their friends, generally for free. Smart phones with internet connectivity also enable users to download games to play, some free, some charged for. In contrast to console and PC games, many web games and downloadable app games are not rated.

Mobile Games: Mobile games can be free or chargeable. 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. These functions however can be de-activated, usually through the phone settings.

Handheld Games: Handheld games are played on small consoles. Two of the current popular handheld consoles are the Nintendo DSi and the Sony Playstation Portable (PSP). Handheld games can also be played on other devices like the iPod Touch or iPad. These devices can also access the internet wirelessly, and allow for playing games with others online.

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 high. Some games might not be suitable for your child's age – they might contain violent or sexually-explicit content.

C

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

If your child takes part in multi-player 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.

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 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, advergames, are designed to promote particular products.

4: Online gaming, Top-tips

» It may seem daunting, but one of the best things parents and carers 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!

» Talk with your children about the types of game(s) they are playing. Are they role-playing games, sports games, strategy games or first person shooters? If you're not sure what they are, ask them to show you how they play and have a go yourself.

» 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 the same safety rules for surfing the net apply to playing games on the internet. Familiarise yourself with the **SMART rules**, and encourage your children and young people to as well.

5: SMART rules

S **Safe:** Keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information when you're chatting or posting online. Personal information includes your e-mail address, phone number and password.

M **Meeting:** Meeting someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. Only do so with your parents' or carers' permission and even then only when they can be present. Remember online friends are still strangers even if you have been talking to them for a long time.

A **Accepting:** Accepting e-mails, IM messages, or opening files, pictures or texts from people you don't know or trust can lead to problems – they may contain viruses or nasty messages!

R **Reliable:** Someone online might lie about who they are and information on the internet may not be true. Always check information with other websites, books or someone who knows. If you like chatting online it's best to only chat to your real world 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, frequently asked questions

1: What are the ways in which my child might be communicating via online video games? What tools are available to help my children here?

Many games offer users the ability to chat with other gamers during the game. Players can 'talk' by using Instant Messenger type messages typed in the course of the game and also by voice conversation (made possible through headsets) which is similar to talking on the phone.

Parental control tools are provided on PCs and consoles, and these can limit gameplay functionality, including chat. Make sure your children know how to protect their privacy. Advise them never to give out any personal information, pictures of themselves, or agree to meet someone in person, when using online chats or sharing information in their user profile.

Make sure they know how to make the most of privacy features built into gaming, internet and mobile services. These could include using a voice mask to disguise their voice in a multi-player game as well as how to block and report other players and use the mute function which can disable chat in many games.

Encourage your child to use an appropriate screen or character name (also called gamertags) that follow the rules of the game site. These names should not reveal any personal information or potentially invite harassment.

In addition to chatting within a game, many gamers chat on community forums and content sites related to 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 remember to respect their privacy on these sites too and locate the means for reporting any issues they encounter.

2: How do I know which game is appropriate/ suitable for my child?

The Pan European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system exists to help parents make informed decisions on buying computer 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. Additional 'descriptors' shown on the back of the packaging indicate the main reasons why a game has received a particular age rating. Parents should particularly be aware of the 'online gameplay' descriptor which indicates whether a game can be played online. With online games, use of this descriptor indicates that the game or site is under the control of an operator who has signed up to the PEGI rating system.

Encourage your child to only access online games that are appropriate for their age 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.

3: Are there parental controls that I can apply?

There are parental controls that you can set based on your child's age and maturity, so make the most of parental controls and privacy features provided by games, console, internet and mobile companies to help protect young gamers. However, these controls aren't a substitute for parental involvement.

4: How can I report inappropriate behaviour by another user?

Sadly cyberbullying by 'griefers' can occur in online games. If your children are being harassed by another player on a game, follow the game's grief-reporting guide to report this behaviour. 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 of the behaviour of another user towards a child, you can report them to the police at **www.ceop.police.uk**.

5: How long should I let my child play online 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 ½ hour. 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.

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 uncopyrighted games, can expose users to unsuitable content and viruses affecting your computer.

7: Online gaming, support and more information

Childnet's **Chatdanger** site, **www.chatdanger.com** offers guidance about chatting on the internet.

Video games trade body **UKIE** offers advice about how to play games safely and sensibly from the '**playsafe**' area of their website **www.ukie.info/playsafe**.

Visit the **Pan European Game Information** and **Entertainment Software Rating Board** websites **www.pegi.info/en/** to find out more about age ratings.

Check out the websites of the games companies such as **Microsoft**, **Nintendo** and **Sony** to look at the parental support they offer.

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Online Reputation Checklist

Your digital footprint is the mark that you leave behind when using the internet and can shape your online reputation. Your digital footprints can be positive or negative and can influence how people see you now or in the future. Use our simple checklist to help manage and maintain your online reputation.

Make a positive footprint

The internet is a fantastic way to shout about all your achievements and to let everyone know about all the amazing things you create and do online. The best way to keep your online reputation in check is to use your time online to get creative and leave a positive mark behind. For example, you could write a blog to promote all the great things you're doing or create a video to teach others something new.

Search yourself online

Do you know what is online about you? It's recommended that you search your name online regularly. You might be aware of the content you post about yourself online, but are you aware of what others post about you? Set up Google Alerts - where you will receive an email every time your name appears in a Google Search result. Remember: if your Instagram or Twitter pages appear you can change this by adjusting your privacy settings.

Check your privacy settings

Make sure you know what information you are sharing on the platforms you use, in particular social networking sites. Most social networking sites have privacy settings to help you manage the content you share and who you share it with; you can decide if you want your posts to be shared with all your online followers, or a specific list of followers or the public. Keep in mind that your friend's content and their settings can also affect your digital footprint; remember you're only as private as your most public friend! Have a look at **www.saferinternet.org.uk/safety-tools** to learn about how to set up privacy settings on your account.

Think before you post

Be proud of everything you post online! Before you post that silly photo of a friend on Instagram, ask yourself if you would be happy for that same friend to post a photo like that of you. Even if a service states that once you post a photo it will disappear after a certain period of time, once something is online it could potentially be there forever!

Deactivate and delete

If you stop using a social media account it's a good idea to deactivate or delete your account. Deactivating your account means that you can still access the content posted for a period of time. Deleting the account removes the account completely. Over time, this will prevent it appearing in search results on a site or through a search engine, and it will remove the risk of these accounts being hacked without you knowing.

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UK Safer Internet Centre

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