



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF Video Games

GUIDE





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Getting the Most Out Of Video Games

Guide

Video games and game playing apps have become a regular part of kids' lives: nearly all youth play these games at least occasionally. At the same time, many parents feel they don't know enough about the games their children are playing, and worry about how video games may impact their children's lives.

Fortunately, there are steps parents can take to ensure that playing video games is a healthy part of their kids' lives and a fun part of family life as well.

The Positive Side of Video Games

There's no doubt that video games offer what all good games provide – an opportunity for entertainment and socialization. But there are other perks as well.

- Because game playing is nearly universal among children, it provides an excellent opportunity for them to find common ground with other kids. Many young boys say that game playing is one of the most common topics of conversation when they meet new people.
- Games can help kids develop skills in areas such as reading and math and problem-solving.
- Games can also help kids learn to work collaboratively with others to achieve goals.
- Games can help make children more comfortable with technology and encourage self-esteem; in some cases video games may even inspire civic participation or involvement in offline activities such as reading or sports.
- There is some evidence that multi-player video games can help to build empathy in children.

Choosing Good Video Games for Your Kids

- Think about your children's interests when looking for games. Are they interested in sports, fantasy or strategy-style games?
- Talk to other parents to get advice and suggestions on good games or check out some of the great game review sites for parents that are online.

Did You Know?

Playing games is the most popular online activity for Canadian kids and teens.

—2016, Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC)

- Want to learn more about a particular game? There are plenty of video game reviews online and “playthrough” videos of games being played on YouTube.
- Find games with an appropriate rating based on your child's age and/or maturity. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) has developed a rating system for computer, Internet and video games that is used by most games sold in North America. ESRB ratings have three parts:
 - **Rating Categories** based on age appropriateness. Keep in mind, though, that these ratings are guidelines and every child is different. Even games with the “Everyone” rating may contain content that some kids will find frightening.
 - **Content Descriptors** that indicate any content that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern.
 - **Interactive Elements** that let you know about interactive aspects of a game, including the users' ability to interact, the sharing of users' location with others, if personal information may be shared with third parties, if in-app purchases of digital goods are completed, and/or if unrestricted Internet access is provided.
- Although many apps are rated through the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC) – including games on Google Play, Nintendo eShop and Windows Store – some apps for smartphones are not rated, so you might want to try them out first.
- Look for games that are challenging and exciting without being violent. Video game developers create many different games where players can feel powerful and in control. Try to find games that offer kids thrills and the chance to experience this in a non-violent way.
- Find games that require strategy and problem-solving skills. If they have an educational component, that's a bonus!
- Look for games with strong, non-stereotypical female and male characters.
- Many games are sold on a “freemium” basis where the game itself is free but players are encouraged to pay for special features to be more competitive with other players or to skip boring parts. Be sure to turn off in-app purchases:
 - For iOS devices, go to Settings, then General, then Restrictions, then Enable Restrictions and turn off In-App Purchases.
 - For Android devices, open the Google Play app, press Menu and then Settings, scroll to User Controls, tap “Use Password to Restrict Purchases” and enter a 4-digit PIN.

If kids want to make in-app purchases, buy them a gift card as opposed to a credit card, so the spending limit is pre-set.

Did You Know?

95% of parents agree that the ESRB rating system helps them to make informed decisions about video games for their families.

—2016, Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC)

- Look for games that involve two players to encourage cooperative play and to make game-playing a more social activity.

Tips for Managing Video Game Playing in Your Home

Show your kids that you are genuinely interested in their video game playing by becoming actively involved:

- Play video games together as much as possible, especially when your kids are young. Not only will this help you become more aware of what they're playing, it also sets the stage for ongoing conversations about video games and reinforces this as a fun family activity.
- Buying games that more than one person in the family will enjoy will also get your kids used to the idea of enjoying video games as a communal pastime and encourage family game playing.
- Rather than simply consuming games, you and your kids could start creating them as well. This is easier than you think: today game-creating software is accessible and easy to use, and many video games have built-in tools that let players create maps and levels.
- Always go through any new games yourself first, especially if you're unsure of the content. (Be aware that some games get more intense the longer you play them, so you may need to invest some additional time playing these games with your kids as well.)
- Talk to your kids from an early age about the kinds of content you find objectionable, and why some games may not be appropriate for them. When you do encounter inappropriate content, be sure to discuss it with your kids.
- Encourage critical thinking in your children about video game content. Ask them how believable events or story lines in games would be if they happened in real life. Challenge stereotypes when you see them and encourage your children to do the same.
- If excessive playing is an issue, control the amount of time your children play. Banning game playing outright is not a realistic option as video games are an important part of kids' lives. (If you put limits on how long a game session can last, keep in mind that many games take a certain amount of time to finish.)
- Remember that while a new game will completely consume your kids, the novelty will pass and other pursuits will eventually hold more appeal.
- Watching other people play video games online is increasingly popular with young people (sometimes even while they are playing games themselves). These videos and broadcasts can range from professional gamers (e-sports) to someone just playing at home. Since this content isn't always rated, make sure to watch a few of your child's favourite gamers to see if the content is appropriate.
- If possible, put your computer or video game console in a public area of your house so that you can closely monitor what your kids are playing.

Did You Know?

68% of parents play video games with their children at least once a week.

—2016, Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC)

- Designate a “charging station” where all mobile devices go each night so that you can quickly tell if someone might be extending a game session at bedtime.
- Look for opportunities to encourage your children to participate in offline activities as well. For instance, if your child enjoys fantasy role-playing games, introduce them to fantasy novels; if they enjoy sports games, encourage them to play sports offline as well.

Did You Know?

Gamers are most likely to play video games on mobile devices:

41% of gamers do this!

—2016, Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC)

Virtual Reality

- Virtual reality systems aren't necessarily any better at making a game *look* real, but they are quite good at making the video game experience *feel* more real, so keep in mind that a game that your kids might play without any issues on a traditional system could end up being too scary or intense for them in virtual reality.
- Some virtual reality systems allow players to move around which can sometimes make them feel nauseous. When your kids are playing games in virtual reality, make sure to clear the area of the room where they are playing.
- Like computers, some virtual reality systems are used for things other than games (immersive video, virtual tours, etc.) so be sure to monitor what's installed on your child's system.

Special Issues for Young Children

- Young children have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy, which makes them particularly vulnerable to frightening and violent media content. Games with sophisticated computer graphics and lots of action may be scary or disturbing to some kids.

Tackling the issue:

Always sit with younger children when they are playing games to gauge what they find frightening. As they get older, look for games which offer non-violent ways of solving conflicts and problems. (Many “action” games allow players to succeed through stealth or careful planning as opposed to violence; a good game review site can steer you towards these.)

- Children often have easy access to games that are inappropriate for them through older siblings and friends.

Tackling the issue:

Talk to your older kids and to the parents of your children's friends so they know any restrictions and rules you have regarding games your children can play. Remember that most game consoles and smartphones can connect to the Internet, so your rules should cover this as well.

- Many young children play free online games or apps, which are not rated by the ESRB. Some of these games may contain content that is not appropriate for young children.

Tackling the issue:

Be especially aware of any video game sites your child visits and any apps they play.

Special Issues for Teens

Because teens are much more autonomous in their online activities, parents need to help them think critically to avoid problems when they're playing video games online.

- Although teens care very much about their online privacy, they can sometimes be cavalier when it comes to applying privacy settings on video game sites and sharing passwords with friends.

Tackling the issue:

Help your teen prevent identity theft and other potential mischief by making sure that their personal information and accounts are secure online – not just on video game sites, but other platforms as well!

- The amount of time teens spend playing games can be an issue, especially if they play online role-playing games or multiplayer games.

Tackling the issue:

Keep in mind that it is normal for teens to throw themselves enthusiastically into hobbies. Consider the prominence of games in the life of your teen: are they socializing less with friends? Are their grades declining? Is their sleep or general health being affected? If you have serious concerns about the impact of game playing on your teen's health, then you should consider seeking professional help.

- Multiplayer online games are very popular with teens. While many of the interactions with other players are positive, bullying and inappropriate language are also common. As well, some players intentionally seek out opportunities to harass others, especially new players.

Tackling the issue:

Tell your teen to let you know if they encounter any inappropriate behaviour from other players. Make it clear that you will not make them stop playing the game—you just want to help them address issues like these by, for example, helping them to notify the moderator or service provider.

- Teens consistently report Mature-rated games among their favourites. While there is no firm evidence that some playing of these games is harmful, health experts worry that certain youth may be more vulnerable to violent media.

Tackling the issue:

If your teen consumes an excessive amount of violent media—movies, music, television and video games—and displays aggressive or depressive behaviour, make sure his or her mental health needs are being addressed through appropriate school, medical or social service counselling.

Did You Know?

49% of gamers
are female

51% of gamers
are male

—2016, Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC)





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