Family Safety Guide

ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Player Safety First

Video games are one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Canada, with millions of players across all ages and backgrounds. Games inspire creativity, teach problem-solving, and connect families and friends—whether gathered around a console in the living room or playing online with teammates around the world.

Like any form of media, video games are best enjoyed when families feel confident and informed. Parents want to know what their children are playing, how much time they are spending, whether they can make purchases, and who they are interacting with online. The good news is that today's video games come with clear ratings, strong parental control tools, and built-in privacy and safety features to help answer those questions.

For over three decades, the video game industry has made player safety a priority. The **Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)** provides trusted age and content ratings; console and mobile platforms include robust parental controls; ESRB and ESAC offer resources and guides for parents; and companies continue to innovate with new features that make play safer and more positive.

This guide brings together the four essentials every parent should know:

- How to use ratings to choose the right games,
- How to set up parental controls on devices,
- How to manage spending and microtransactions, and
- How to protect privacy and safety online.

With the right tools and a little family conversation, video games can be a fun, safe, and enriching part of everyday life.

Game Ratings: Choosing Age-Appropriate Games

Video games are rated to help parents and players make informed decisions. The **Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)** assigns the trusted ratings that appear on video games and apps for video games sold in Canada. These ratings make it easy to quickly understand if a game is appropriate for your child and why it received its rating.

The ESRB three-part system:

- **Rating Categories** – suggest the appropriate age group (e.g., E for Everyone, E10+ for Everyone 10+, T for Teen, M for Mature, etc.).
- **Content Descriptors** – explain why a game received its rating (e.g., Violence, Language, etc.).
- **Interactive Elements** – highlight online features that may be of interest to parents, such as player-to-player chat (Users Interact), or in-game spending (In-Game Purchases).

How ratings are enforced:

- **ESRB enforcement actions:** ESRB can employ several mechanisms, including sanctions and fines, to ensure that publishers accurately disclose all of the content in their games and responsibly market them.
- **Marketing enforcement:** ESRB enforces industry-adopted marketing and advertising guidelines to ensure that games are advertised responsibly and in ways consistent with their ratings. Video game ads comply with the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards to ensure alignment with the Ad Standards.
- **Parental resources:** ESAC and the ESRB offer several resources for parents, including rating search and parental control guides.

Ratings are not just icons on a box or on a product detail page online; they are tools to help guide conversations and decisions. By checking the age rating, and the Content Descriptors and the Interactive Elements, parents can decide which games are appropriate for their family and set expectations with their children.

> **Parent Tip:** Always look at more than just the age rating. The Content Descriptors and Interactive Elements often answer important questions about a game's content and features.

Parental Controls: Tools to Shape Play

Every major video game console, PC platform, and mobile device comes with built-in parental controls. These tools allow families to set rules that match their household values and give children the freedom to enjoy games within safe boundaries. Setting these controls only takes a few minutes, and once in place, they apply automatically every time your child plays.

What parental controls can do:

- **Set playtime limits**: Manage when and how long your child can play, with different rules for weekdays and weekends.
- **Restrict content by ESRB rating**: Automatically block access to games based on ESRB-assigned age ratings.
- **Manage spending**: Require a password or PIN before purchases, set monthly allowances, or block purchases entirely.
- **Control communication**: Limit or block chat, friend requests, and other interactions with strangers.
- **Track activity**: Receive playtime and spending reports to better understand gaming habits.

Parental controls are flexible and can grow with your child. You might start with stricter settings for younger kids and gradually relax them as they become more responsible. Many platforms even allow you to manage settings remotely through a parent app on your phone.

> **Parent Tip:** Set parental controls together with your child. Framing them as shared rules encourages cooperation and helps children understand that limits exist to keep gaming fun, safe, and balanced.

Spending in Games

Some games offer optional purchases of virtual items, often called microtransactions. These may include new outfits for a character or a seasonal "battle pass" with bonus challenges and rewards. While these extras can be fun for those who are interested, they are not required to play the game.

In 2018, ESRB introduced the In-Game Purchases Interactive Element, which is assigned to any game that includes offers to purchase additional virtual items. The second spending related Interactive Element, In-Game Purchases (Includes Random Items), was introduced in 2020 to label games that offer the ability to spend additional money on in-game goods for which the player doesn't know prior to purchase what exactly they will be receiving (e.g., loot boxes, item packs, mystery awards).

Common types of in-game purchases:

- **Cosmetic items:** Skins, outfits, or emotes that personalize a character.
- **Season or battle passes:** Bundles of challenges and rewards released over a set period.
- **Virtual currency:** Bought with real money and then used in-game.
- **Randomized rewards (loot boxes):** Packs or crates that contain mystery items. ESRB requires these to be clearly labeled as "*In-Game Purchases (Includes Random Items)*."
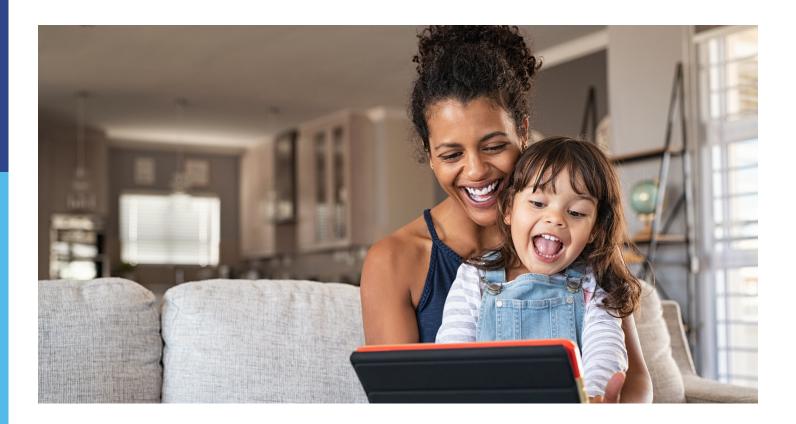
More about loot boxes and random items

Whether purchasing or unlocking loot boxes and other randomized items through gameplay, the player always gets something in return. The exact reward remains a surprise. For some players, this element of surprise adds excitement, but for parents it is important to understand that these mechanics involve chance.

To help families, since 2020 ESRB has been assigning an Interactive Element to notify consumers, especially parents, of these options: "*In-Game Purchases (Includes Random Items).*" This notice appears both on physical game boxes and on digital storefronts. Parents can also use parental controls to require approval for purchases, set spending limits, or block payments entirely.

Talking with children about how these systems work (i.e., why they are popular, how chance is involved, and how to budget carefully) can help build good habits and avoid misunderstandings.

How purchases are flagged and managed:

- **Clear labeling:** ESRB's Interactive Elements make it easy to identify whether a game offers the ability to spend real-world currency before parents decide to buy or download a new game for their kids.
- **Parental controls:** Available on consoles, PCs, and mobile devices to set limits or require approval. Visit theesa.ca/trust-and-safety/parental-controls/ for step-by-step parental controls guides.
- **Family conversations:** Encourage children to think carefully before spending, especially when purchases involve randomized rewards.

By combining labeling, parental tools, and open communication, families can ensure that in-game spending remains an appropriate part of the play experience rather than a source of stress or surprise.

Parent Tip: Look for ESRB's "In-Game Purchases (Includes Random Items)" label before downloading a game. Use this as a cue to discuss budgeting, chance, and decision-making with your child.

Online Privacy and Safety: Playing Smart Online

Many games today include online features such as multiplayer modes, voice or text chat, and the ability to create or share content. These tools can make games more social and engaging, but they also bring risks if children share too much personal information or interact with strangers in unsafe ways.

What parents should know:

- **Online interactions:** Many games allow players to chat, send messages, or invite others to join.
- User-generated content: Some games let players create and share levels, characters, or other materials.
- **Data sharing:** Games may ask for access to location or other personal details.

Tools to protect privacy:

- **Privacy settings:** Limit who can see your child's profile, activity, or game history.
- **Communication controls:** Mute or block strangers in chat and restrict who can send friend requests.
- **Reporting features:** Built-in tools allow players to flag inappropriate behavior quickly.
- **Parental controls:** Apply restrictions on online play or disable communication entirely for younger kids. Many consoles and platforms allow parents to curate their kids' friends lists so they can make sure they are only communicating with approved players.

By setting clear rules and using available tools, parents can help children enjoy online games safely. Encourage kids never to share personal information—like their real name, school, or location—with people they only know online. Remind them that what's shared online can often stay online permanently.

> **Parent Tip:** Create family ground rules about online play. Agree on what information can be shared, who it's okay to play with, and what to do if something feels uncomfortable.

Family Matters

The video game industry is committed to creating positive, inclusive, and safe play environments. Tools like ESRB ratings, parental controls, and privacy settings are designed to empower families, giving them the confidence to guide their child's digital experiences.

The best results come when families stay involved. Ask your child what they're playing, try a game together, and keep open conversations about screen time, spending, and safety. With the right mix of guidance and engagement, video games can be a rewarding and enriching part of family life.

Resources for Families:

- theesa.ca/trust-and-safety – Canadian industry resources on trust and safety.
- esrb.org – Ratings, guides, and parental tools.