

Online Gaming Safety Tips for Kids

Online gaming has seen dramatic growth due to COVID-19. In Q1 2020, mobile game [downloads grew 75% and time spent on those games increased 47%](#) over the same period a year ago. That shift has brought millions of kids to the gaming world.

Without proper guidance, kids may open themselves or you to some risks, such as overuse, contact from strangers, or an exhausted credit card. Here are some things to consider as you allow your kids to play new online games or for more time than you would have otherwise:

1. Consider What They Can Play:

Keep content age appropriate and educational.

- Involve them as you consider the criteria for what is age appropriate and educational.
- Ask them, “what is the goal of this game and how do you reach it?”
- Check out [ESRB.org](#) or [PEGI.info](#) for game descriptions and age ratings or check out Common Sense Media for [some recommended lists](#).

2. Outline When Can They Play:

Talk to your kids about their day and how to fill the 24 hours.

- Dr. Michael Rich of the Center on Media and Child Health recommends creating a schedule with your kids and showing them how much of each day is taken up by the things they need to do to stay healthy.
- For example, maybe it’s eight hours of sleep, two hours of online classes, one hour of homework, taking a walk/exercise, or sitting down for meals.
- Work with them on what’s left for fun and they will learn to appreciate and budget their time.



3. Define Time Limits:

Make sure kids understand there are limits to how long they can play.

- Consider whether your child can self-regulate and stop the game after an agreed upon time.
- If they cannot, consider games that have an end time to them, such as FIFA or Rocket League. This can help ensure they don’t get sucked in for an endless number of hours.

4. Identify Where They Can Play:

Make sure there is a designated and agreed upon place.

- If you need quiet time, perhaps have them play in another part of your home, but somewhere that allows you to still easily check in on them.
- Consider having the kids use headphones if a game is too noisy.

5. Agree Whether This is a Social Activity or Not:

The best way to understand is to play.

- Take the time to review these questions:
 - Can they play with others?
 - Do the family or privacy settings allow you to limit who they can interact with?
 - Is there a chat function? Can you restrict it?
 - Are the chats pre-scripted or free form?
- Play the game with them once or twice so you understand how the social parts of it work.
- If you're not comfortable or don't feel their old enough to be engaging with others online, consider restricting any of the social features.
- If you're okay with it, remind your kids of safe, kind behavior towards others and always use privacy settings in a way that best protects them.
- Encourage them to come to you if they experience anything scary or troubling from another player, and report those users to the application or game, if possible.



6. Keep it Private and Secure:

Review and use privacy settings wherever possible.

- When you sign up for a game, use multi-factor authentication to give you an added level of protection from someone trying to access your account.
- Some gaming apps may want access to your device's camera, microphone, location, and contact lists. Consider whether this is necessary and decline if it isn't.
- Remind your kids to never give out private information to anyone they've never met, such as home address or passwords.

7. Understand the Costs:

Some games are free, but require spending to continue or to enhance play (also known as a "freemium" version).

- Consider blocking in-application purchases or requiring a password to spend money in the game.
- Consider using pre-paid gift cards so that your child's spending is not charged to your credit card.
 - Pre-paid cards can also help your child learn how to budget their spending.
- Free versions of gaming applications may be riddled with advertisements that could tempt your child to click or tap and go off into another part of the internet. Consider a paid version to avoid these.
- There are other elements of games, such as loot boxes, which are a group of virtual items you can obtain by spending real money.
 - The increased concern around loot boxes is that you never know what is in your "loot", making it similar to gambling.
 - The first time you spend, you may not get what you wanted (like a lottery ticket), so you may be tempted to keep spending until you do.

8. Beware of Cybercriminals:

Gaming is a huge, lucrative industry. Remind your kids once they become part of the gaming world, they may come across cybercriminals.

- Some cybercriminals try to create gaming applications that appear legitimate, but are a fake version and put your personal information at risk.
- Cybercriminals may lock you out of games until you pay a ransom.
- Do your research and stick to games which have a good reputation and are used by lots of people.
- For more complex games, such as Fortnite or Apex Legends, criminals are selling “cheat codes”. You can purchase these codes to defeat another player or win a game (aimbots and wallhacks are some of these methods, which you can [read more about in our research paper](#)).
 - Gaming companies are catching on to these methods. Remind your kids that cheating will not only get them kicked out of the game, but could also put personal data, like credit card information, at risk for attack by cybercriminals.
- Remind your kids to have fun while they play, but to do it in a fair and safe way.



There are many things to consider when you allow your kids to enter the online gaming world, but these risks don't mean it's “game over” for all. Consider the issues we've outlined above to help your kids keep games a safe, healthy, and fun part of their day.