

## **Gaming: What parents and carers need to know**

### **The popularity of gaming**

Gaming is a popular past-time for many children, young people and adults across the world. There are a variety of games available aimed at various ages: from mission-based adventure to animation and sports themed. For most children and young people, gaming is a fun way to spend time with friends and create opportunities to develop teamwork, concentration skills and problem-solving. Many games have adopted an interactive online element- whether it's playing against other users, chatting or making purchases.

### **Chatting within gaming**

Gaming is a type of social network. Many games have a chat function enabling users to interact with one another. Dependent on the privacy settings chosen, gamers can be contacted by people they may or may not know, or play against 'bots'. A bot is a character or player that is controlled by a computer, created by external sources, to send messages to gamers. Often, these messages contain links to external websites which are inappropriate for children and young people; showing violent or sexual content. Bots can sometimes be hard to spot as their messages can seem very realistic. If your child receives a message from an unknown user, ask them to not respond or click on any links contained within the message. Report these users directly to the site.

Often the communication within gaming is to coordinate multi-player game tactics, although it can be just to chat as gamers play. Messages can take the form of instant messenger (similar to texting) or voice over internet protocol (VoIP). VoIP allows gamers to talk to one another (usually through a headset) in a group conversation during the game. Some game consoles also allow young people to leave voice messages for other users and to chat even when a game is not in play.

### **Gaming can offer offenders a platform to communicate with children:**

This communication can present as a risk to young people as gaming platforms can be used by adults seeking to harm young people. Playing games can be exciting and consuming and sometimes this can mean that children can become a little less guarded when considering who they talk to and what they share. It may also be seen as 'normal' to talk to adults in a game – especially if children can learn from them – than it would be to talk to an adult on another social media platform. Some offenders seek to exploit this and encourage children to chat with the aim of building a relationship with them. Offenders may also try to encourage a child to move from a game to a private messenger platform to have one-to-one conversations with them. These platforms help offenders to build a relationship with a young person quickly, and are often harder to moderate than group chat within games.

The precise functionality of each game varies however there are some ways to support children to stay safe if they chat whilst gaming:

- Have ongoing conversations with your child about who they are talking to online. Questions about whether they know them in real life and what they share are vital to support your child to be safer in gaming.
- Take time to explore games with your children. Ask them to show you what they like about the game and take an interest. Speak with them about making their profile private if possible and talk with them about information that is safe to share e.g. nicknames as opposed to full names.
- Be aware of the chat platforms your child is using. Ask your child about what they would do if someone within a game asked to talk to them in private, whether that's on another platform or within the game. Help your child to identify this warning sign and explain what they can do to help them to keep safe.

- All young people need support to make safe decisions online. It is recommended that primary aged children remain under adult supervision whilst gaming, for example ensuring an adult is within earshot of VoIP conversations and able to see any chat taking place.

#### **Offenders can give 'gifts' via gaming platforms:**

Some games and apps allow users to make purchases. Gamers can buy tools that can be used in the game to give them an advantage such as weapons, coins or cheats. Many children do not have access to money to make purchases in games, so it can be tempting to accept 'in game currency' to help them progress. Offenders use gifts in gaming to encourage children to trust them. They may offer gifts asking for nothing in return, this can be part of the grooming process and can help to build a close relationship with a young person. Others may try to use gifts as 'leverage' to persuade young people to do something such as moving to a different online platform, going on webcam or taking a photo of themselves.

#### **Talking to your child about gifts within gaming:**

- Speak with your child about bribery and 'too-good to be true' offers. Encourage them to question anything they are offered online from someone they do not know offline, and remind them that it's always better to check in with a parent or carer if they are unsure what to do if offered a reward or gift.
- Speak to your child about 'warning signs'. Talk to your child about the feelings they might get when something doesn't feel right, or be specific with examples. These might be inappropriate words that someone could use in a conversation (e.g. sexually explicit language) or behaviours such as asking for lots of personal information.
- Young people can sometimes feel complicit in abuse if they have chatted with someone they feel they shouldn't have or accepted a gift and something has gone wrong. Reassure your child that no matter what might have happened you are always there to confide in and it is never their fault. Ongoing reminders that it's never too late to get help are important.

Read more about the signs of [online grooming](#) here.

If you are worried that a child is being groomed in a game, or on any other online platform you should seek support. You can contact your local police or [report to CEOP](#). If you believe a child is in immediate danger call the police on 999.

If you would like to talk to a professional about any other online concerns, please call the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000.

#### **Top tips for gaming:**

- Explore parental controls on games consoles. Most games consoles enable parents to apply settings that can help to manage a child's online activities. For more information on enabling parental controls visit [Internet Matters](#).
- Familiarise yourself with the blocking and reporting functions on the games your child plays, and ensure they know how to use these. It's helpful to sit with your child and go through this together.
- Continue to have conversations with your child about gaming and their online activity. Reassure your child that they can always talk to you about anything that makes them feel uncomfortable- whether it's the game content or something they've heard when chatting with other users.
- Learn more about gaming and the [PEGI age ratings](#).
- Bullying is never okay. If your child is experiencing name calling or harassment while gaming, visit [Childline](#) for helpful advice on getting help and support.

*This advice and other similar material can be found at <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk>*