

A program of the



NetSmartz®

GAMING SAFELY PLAYBOOK

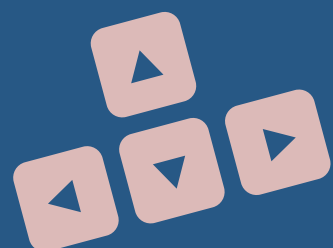


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What's Inside This Playbook

Gaming can be a meaningful space for growth and connection. It builds problem-solving, teamwork and communication skills, while providing opportunities for stress relief and social belonging. For some kids, their digital identity is where they feel most confident. Though there are many positive aspects to gaming, there are also risks, particularly for children and youth. Adults can support children to develop skills to help stay safer online while they play games.

This playbook has the following elements to help you and your family tackle gaming safety together:

- ✦ **Gaming Information.** An overview of the topic of each section — what it is and how it works.
- ✦ **Risks to Consider.** Specific risks tied to that topic, so you know what to watch for.
- ✦ **Skill Building.** Ongoing conversations and habits that help your child build the skills to navigate gaming safely.
- ✦ **Tangible Steps.** Concrete actions you can take to help protect your child.



Games & Ratings

GAME DESIGN TYPES

- ✚ **Single-Player Games.** Games played solo with no online interaction or chats. Some single-player games allow players to download customized content that can be shared with others, and some also let you go online to play multiplayer, even though the base game is designed for solo play.
- ✚ **Multiplayer Games.** Some multiplayer games are synchronous, meaning players interact live. Others are asynchronous, allowing players to share the same world or game on their own schedule, leave messages for other players, or take turns.
- ✚ **User-Generated/Open-World Games.** In open-world games, anyone can build worlds, chat rooms and characters inside the game. Both the gaming platform and users can create new content. These frequent changes can make parental oversight of the game more challenging.

WHERE GAMES ARE PLAYED: PLATFORMS

- ✚ **Personal Computer (PC) Gaming.** Refers to games played on a computer, but many PC games support cross-platform play, letting kids play with people on consoles and other devices. In some games, this feature can only be turned on or off from console settings. If your child plays on both a console and a PC using the same account, the settings for turning off cross-platform play and where to find them will vary by game.
- ✚ **Console Gaming.** A gaming device connected to a TV, with common examples including Xbox, PlayStation and Nintendo Switch. Consoles provide built-in parental controls that allow parents to manage settings such as game access, screen time, purchases and online interactions. However, children may access content or features that are not restricted if they use an adult account, guest access, or if parental settings are not properly configured.
- ✚ **Mobile Gaming.** Games played on handheld devices like cell phones, tablets, handheld gaming consoles, or PC-based handheld devices. Easy to download, often free, many mobile games have no real age verification.
- ✚ **Virtual Reality (VR) Gaming.** VR gaming fully immerses players in a virtual environment through a headset, creating a more intense and realistic experience.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT THE RATING SYSTEM

- ✦ A rating reflects the game's content, but it does not describe who your child may interact with while playing or guarantee their safety.
- ✦ A game rated E (Everyone) can still include open chat with people of all ages.

Risks to Consider

- ▶ **Age Verification.** A helpful tool, but difficult to enforce effectively. Verification systems can be bypassed in both directions. Kids can get around them (using AI-generated images, makeup, or an older sibling's photo) to access adult spaces, and adults can use the same tactics to pose as a minor, and access spaces meant for kids. This can misidentify a child's age and expose them to interactions with the wrong age group. Some platforms also require a minimum age to create an account, but parents can log children in under their account, which removes all age-based protections entirely.
- ▶ **Mobile Gaming.** Many mobile games require in-app purchases to progress in the game. Offenders exploit this by offering children in-game currency, skins, or other advantages as a grooming tactic to build trust and further victimize them.
- ▶ **Cross-Platform Play.** Many popular games now allow players using different devices, including consoles, tablets and PCs, to play together in the same online matches or lobbies. This means that even if a child is playing on a console with parental controls enabled, they may still interact with players using other platforms and accounts with different levels of restrictions. Parental controls don't always carry over across platforms, so a setting that protects your child on one device may not apply once cross-play connects them to someone on another device.
- ▶ **VR headsets.** Children can be exposed to adult content and/or interactions while using a VR headset, but a parent cannot hear or see what their child is experiencing while using it.

Skill Building

Goal Setting. Before your child starts playing, set positive goals together about why they will be playing. Discuss what they hope to gain from the experience, skills they can build through the game and ways to practice those same skills through offline activities. Schedule regular check-ins to revisit and update these goals based on their gaming interactions.

Tangible Steps



STAY INFORMED.

Watch gameplay videos and read reviews together to learn what the game includes, how players interact, what community forums exist (often on outside platforms, even if the connection starts in-game) and what safety settings are available. Use what you learn to decide whether the game is a good fit for your family.



LOOK UP THE RATING OF YOUR CHILD'S FAVORITE GAMES TOGETHER.

Talk about what the rating means.

[ESRB.org](https://www.esrb.org)



COMMUNICATION AND PRIVACY SETTINGS.

Review your child's in-game communication settings, privacy controls and cross-play options together to help create a safer gaming experience.



GAMING AGREEMENT.

Sit with your child and create an agreement including time limits, who they can play with, goals and what they hope to gain from the game.

[Common Sense Media Family Media Agreement](#)

Safety Settings & Parental Controls



Parental controls are one layer of protection, but they can create a false sense of security. Children can easily find workarounds. Active involvement in your child's online and offline life, paired with ongoing meaningful conversations, build the skills they need to navigate risk, make safer choices and come to you when something feels wrong.

Risks to Consider

- ▶ **User-created game modifications (mods)** can bypass safety settings entirely. Mods aren't age-rated or reviewed, and children can easily install them from third-party sites — introducing content or interactions that get around parental controls without your knowledge.
- ▶ **Disabling chat is not enough.** Many platforms let users create and share their own content, which means children may still encounter inappropriate or violent experiences — even when chat is turned off.
- ▶ **A factory reset can silently undo your protections.** Resetting a console or reinstalling a game on a mobile device can remove parental controls and app-specific restrictions, leaving the game unrestricted until you set everything up again.
- ▶ **Moving conversations off platform.** Many games have active communities that extend beyond the game to streaming platforms, fan forums, social media and messaging apps. Even with in-game chat disabled, children may still be encouraged to engage on these less restricted platforms.
- ▶ **VPNs let kids route around your controls.** A VPN hides a user's location and activity, making it possible for children to bypass content filters and parental controls entirely.
- ▶ **Voice chat often can't be monitored.** Many parental control tools have no way to track or review live voice communication, leaving an entire channel of interaction invisible to parents.
- ▶ **A memorized PIN to bypass parental controls.** If a child observes and remembers a parent's PIN or password, they can access the parent's unrestricted account or change safety settings — bypassing every protection you've put in place.

Analysis of more than 60,000 CyberTipline reports with a gaming nexus found that nearly 67% referenced moving communication from a game to another app, game, or website.

Skill Building

Critical Thinking. Help your child understand what safety settings can and can't do. Set up parental controls together, explain why each setting is in place, and the risk it helps reduce. Encourage them to ask questions and revisit the conversation about safety often and review settings regularly.

Tangible Steps



KEEP GAMING IN SHARED SPACES.

Encourage gaming and technology use in common areas where you can observe and step in if needed. Avoid consoles and handheld devices in bedrooms, especially overnight.



USE AGE-APPROPRIATE ACCOUNTS.

Create a child account whenever a platform offers one. This keeps your family's settings, purchases and content restrictions managed under one linked family setup, similar to how a streaming service manages multiple user profiles. Some parents choose to let their child play a game rated above their age, and that's a personal family decision. If you do, a linked family account still gives you more oversight and control than an adult account would — helping you manage settings, purchases and content even when the game itself isn't age-restricted for your child.



USE FAMILY MANAGEMENT TOOLS.

Use the gaming platform's family management features to link your account to your child's, manage safety settings and receive activity summaries.



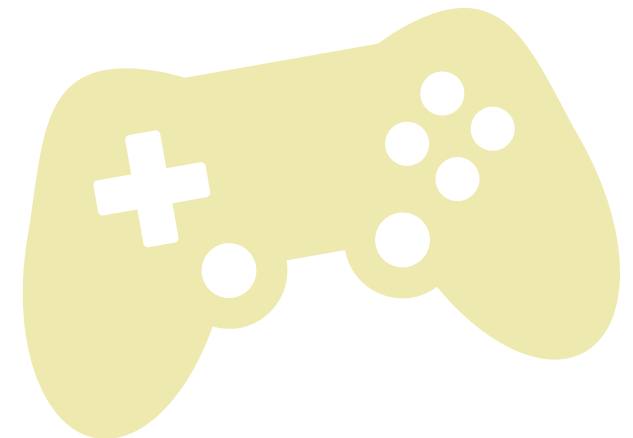
MONITOR VOICE CHAT.

Many consoles default to headset-only audio. Check whether voice chat can play through TV speakers or be disabled.



SAFETY SETTINGS.

Set up the game's privacy and safety settings together and set up a calendar reminder to review them regularly.



Currency, Rewards & Special Events



Games are built to keep players engaged. Understanding how virtual currencies, rewards and limited-time events work can help parents recognize the appeal of gaming and the ways these features may increase risk.

HOW IN-GAME CURRENCY WORKS

Many games are free to download but encourage spending through virtual currencies, limited time offers and exclusive rewards. Even games that require an upfront purchase often include additional in-game purchases. Understanding these systems helps explain why children may become emotionally invested in earning or buying digital items. For them, missing a limited-time event can feel like missing a school event or social gathering. Understanding this can help trusted adults respond with empathy while still maintaining healthy boundaries.

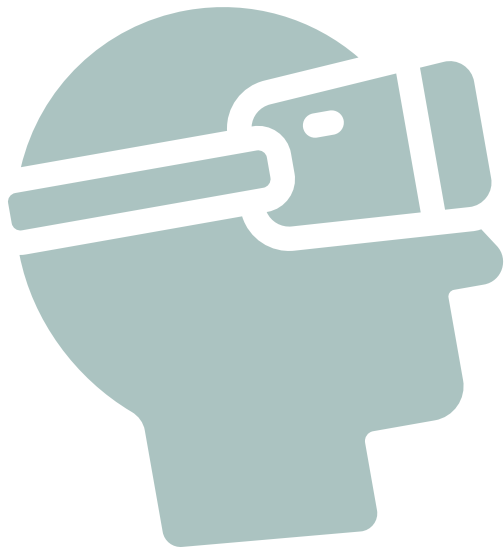
In an analysis of 60,000 Cybertipline reports with a gaming nexus, nearly 10,000 contained references to exchanging in-game currency, real-world currency, in-game items of value, or other items of value such as gift cards, electronics, or subscriptions.

Risks to Consider

- ▶ **In-game currency and gifting.** Platforms that allow gifting, in-game currency and digital wallets make it easier for children to spend money or receive gifts without parents noticing every transaction. Offenders know children have limited spending power and use gifts to build trust. Even without a gifting system, bad actors may promise gifts they never deliver as a grooming tactic. In some instances, the offender pays the child to create or send images or videos, livestream, or participate in a voice or video call.
- ▶ **Special events and limited-time rewards.** These features can create a sense of urgency, making children more likely to prioritize gaming over other healthy activities and responsibilities. Offenders can take advantage of that sense of urgency by offering to help complete an event or claim a reward.
- ▶ **User-generated events.** Some platforms allow users to advertise their own games and events to other players through built-in hubs — drawing children into unmoderated, user-created spaces that have not been reviewed for age-appropriate content, potentially exposing them to inappropriate content and interactions with users of all ages.

Skill Building

- ✦ **Emotional regulation.** Help your child recognize and manage strong emotions related to gaming, such as frustration, excitement, disappointment, or fear of missing out. Practice calming strategies together, include them in your safety plan, and revisit them regularly. [CDC.gov/mental-health/living-with](https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/living-with)
- ✦ **Financial Literacy.** Create a spending plan together and decide in advance how much, if any, real money can be spent on games.
- ✦ **Patience.** Help your child learn to wait for the things they want, whether that means saving for an in-game purchase, earning rewards through gameplay, or stopping when it's time to log off. Learning to tolerate delayed gratification helps build healthier spending habits and makes it easier to transition from gaming to other activities.



Tangible Steps



PERMISSION FOR PURCHASES.

Require your child to ask permission before any in-game purchase.



ENABLE SPENDING CONTROLS.

Use console, device, or app store controls to require parental approval before purchases.



PAYMENT METHODS.

Use a gift card or prepaid balance instead of linking credit cards, and remove saved payment information from all gaming accounts and devices.



PLAN FOR SPECIAL EVENTS.

Before a limited-time event, agree on start and stop times, goals and expectations for interactions with other players. Check in after the event to talk about their experience and how they managed any pressure to keep playing.

Gamers, Streamers & the Parasocial Relationship



GAMERS AND STREAMERS

Many adults don't realize how deeply connected kids can feel to a streamer they've never met. It is the same kind of feeling many of us had toward a celebrity we idolized as teens — someone we felt like we personally knew. Streamers are often teenagers or young adults who broadcast themselves gaming, building a community around something they love, and as their audience grows, content often expands beyond gaming into other topics. Children naturally look to peers and role models outside the home to shape their identity and sense of belonging — and streamers may fill that role, carrying real social and emotional weight even though the connection is entirely one-sided.

- ✦ **Anonymous identities.** Some creators and players use cartoon avatars. Children may not know who is actually behind an account or message yet still develop a strong attachment to the digital persona.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

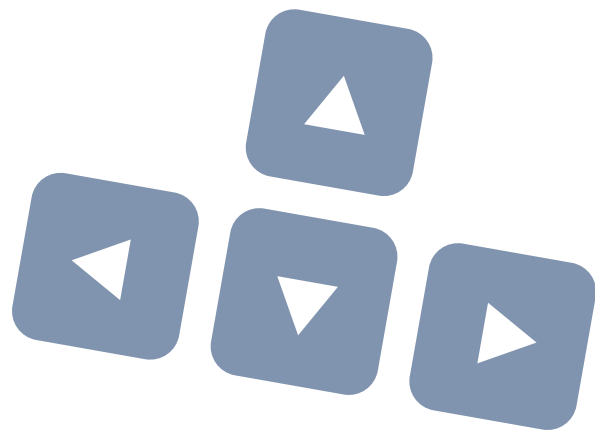
Children/youth can form parasocial relationships with streamers where they feel deeply connected, but the streamer doesn't know the child personally. Many streamers interact directly with fans through servers, social media, live stream chats and sometimes gameplay. These interactions can blur the line between healthy admiration and feeling like you have a personal relationship.

Risks to Consider

Grooming & Exploitation. Children who feel connected to a creator may be more likely to trust moderators, fan community members, or people claiming to represent that creator. Offenders may exploit that sense of familiarity to gain access, build trust, groom and exploit them.

Skill Building

- ✦ **Critical Thinking.** Help your child evaluate the content they watch and the creators they follow by understanding how streamers make money through views, sponsorships, donations, subscriptions and merchandise, and how their online personalities may differ from who they are in everyday life. Help them think critically about their online interactions and experiences, just as you do for other aspects of their life.
- ✦ **Healthy Relationships.** Help your child recognize the difference between admiration and friendship, identify the characteristics of healthy friendships, feel confident setting boundaries and understand why feeling connected to someone does not mean the relationship is mutual or trustworthy.
- ✦ **Open Communication.** Stay involved in your child's online activities and talk regularly about the games they play, creators they follow, communities they join and people they interact with online. Help your child build the confidence to ask questions, share concerns and ask for help when something feels wrong.



Tangible Steps



WATCH A STREAM TOGETHER.

Watch one of your child's favorite streamers together. Ask questions about what they enjoy about the creator or content, what they're learning and how interacting with a streamer differs from having a friendship.



STAY INVOLVED IN THEIR ONLINE ACTIVITIES.

Learn how your child engages in games and gaming communities and who they interact with online. Regularly review their messages, friends list and gaming accounts together. Some server names don't reflect the content or interactions they contain, and children may have access to spaces that aren't appropriate for them.



CREATE A FAMILY RULE ABOUT DIRECT CONTACT.

Together, set clear family rules about communicating with online friends, gamers and content creators. Agree that if a streamer, gamer, moderator, or online celebrity ever contacts your child directly, they will tell you before responding.



TALK ABOUT IMPERSONATION.

Explain that fake accounts pretending to be popular creators exist. Show your child how to look for verification, official links and account history. Remind them that even verified accounts should never ask for personal information or move conversations to another app.



ASK QUESTIONS WHILE YOU WATCH.

Use conversations to build critical thinking and learn from each other's perspectives.



Grinding Culture, Social & Emotional Dynamics

When parents say, “they are just playing too long,” what is often actually happening is that their child is trying to maintain progress, friendships, status and social belonging. Modern gaming is a social world where children build relationships, join communities and develop a sense of self. With that, comes a rich and demanding social environment that can be difficult to navigate. Understanding those dynamics helps parents respond with empathy while helping children set healthy boundaries.

WHAT ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES LOOK LIKE

Every game carries its own community and subculture, with norms and belief structures that extend well beyond the screen. While many are positive, some gaming communities normalize toxic behavior, harmful ideologies, or boundary-crossing content that make children more vulnerable to grooming, manipulation and exploitation by offenders who use shared interests and community trust to gain access to them.

GRINDING CULTURE

“Grinding” refers to repetitive, time-intensive gameplay rewarded with level-ups and status. Games are designed to make rewards feel just close enough to keep chasing, and since friends are often grinding too, stopping can feel like falling behind or letting the team down.

Risks to Consider

- ▶ **The emotional and social stakes.** A child’s skill level, rank and reputation can influence their respect, inclusion and social status within a gaming community. Because friendships and teamwork often depend on participation, children may feel pressure to keep playing, avoid letting teammates down, or tolerate uncomfortable or abusive interactions to protect their place in the group. When a child becomes upset about leaving a game, the reaction isn’t always about the game itself—they may be worried about losing progress, disappointing teammates, or being excluded from their community.
- ▶ **It’s by design.** Games are intentionally designed to keep players engaged through rewards, progression and social connections. Children are more susceptible to these design features because their brains are still developing, particularly those children who are struggling with mental health.
- ▶ **Social isolation.** Healthy child development depends on a variety of social experiences across different settings, including school, family, community and friendships. When gaming becomes a child’s primary source of connection, offline relationships can feel overwhelming, increasing the risk of isolation and social anxiety. Offenders can exploit that need for connection by offering friendship, status, or in-game rewards to build trust and gain access.

Watch for changes in your child's behavior that may signal gaming is becoming unhealthy or that they need additional support.

- ▶ Disrupted sleep
- ▶ Withdrawal from offline activities
- ▶ Emotional outbursts when asked to stop
- ▶ Declining school performance
- ▶ Increasing isolation from family and friends

WHY CHILDREN DON'T ALWAYS BLOCK OR REPORT

Most games include personal moderation tools to block, mute, or report other players, but children don't always use them. Fear of exclusion, retaliation, or losing friendships may outweigh the desire to protect themselves, making ongoing conversations about healthy boundaries especially important.

Skill Building

- ✦ **Sense of Belonging.** Help your child build healthy relationships across different areas of life, including family, school, sports, extracurricular activities and their community. Having multiple sources of connection helps children develop a strong sense of belonging without relying on gaming alone. A strong sense of belonging is part of what builds resiliency.
- ✦ **Assertiveness.** Teach your child that protecting their wellbeing is a sign of strength. Help them recognize unhealthy interactions, how to set boundaries and feel confident leaving conversations, games, or communities that make them uncomfortable.
- ✦ **Emotional Regulation.** Help your child recognize frustration, disappointment, or anxiety when it's time to stop playing. Validate those feelings while helping them transition to other activities. Practice coping strategies together so they can calm themselves and manage difficult emotions.

Tangible Steps



CREATE A GAMING ROUTINE.

Set a gaming schedule together and be consistent. Predictable routines reduce anxiety and help children transition more easily.



PLAN THE TRANSITION.

Before a gaming session begins, have them choose an offline activity for afterward and set a timer. Having something to look forward to makes it easier to stop.



PLAY TOGETHER.

Add video games to family game nights. Playing together helps you understand your child's gaming world and creates natural opportunities for conversation.

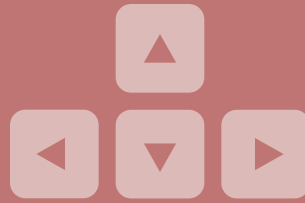


KEEP DEVICES OUT OF BEDROOMS OVERNIGHT.

Store phones, tablets and handheld gaming devices outside bedrooms overnight.



Online Risks & Asking for Help



Understanding trending online risks can help parents recognize warning signs and respond early. While these crimes occur across many online platforms, gaming spaces are increasingly part of how offenders identify, contact and manipulate children of all ages.

Risks to Consider

- ▶ **Online Bullying and Harassment** in online gaming can take many forms — verbal abuse, deliberate exclusion, targeted harassment and public humiliation. Most platforms have built-in tools to report, block and mute other players. If your child experiences harassment, encourage them to block the player, save evidence and talk to a trusted adult. Harassment involving threats or sexual content should be reported to law enforcement or the CyberTipline.
- ▶ **Online enticement** involves an individual communicating with someone believed to be a child via the internet with the intent to commit a sexual offense or abduction. In gaming, offenders may begin by offering friendship, help, gifts, or in-game rewards before moving conversations to private messaging apps or introducing sexual topics.
- ▶ **Sextortion** is a form of child sexual exploitation where children are threatened or blackmailed with the possibility of publicly sharing nude or sexual images of them unless the child sends additional sexual content or money or engages in sexual activity. Gaming platforms may be used to establish trust before conversations move to another app where exploitation occurs.
- ▶ **Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI)** technology allows a user to create new images, videos, audio and text based on user requests or prompts. While this technology has many benefits, it is also being used to sexually exploit children, including the creation of GAI Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).
- ▶ **Sadistic Online Exploitation (SOE)** involves violent online actors who coerce or manipulate children into sexually exploitative conduct, including the production of child sexual abuse material and the exploitation of other children. Certain gaming subcultures have been directly linked to SOE, making it critical for parents to understand that gaming spaces are not separate from this risk.

- ▶ **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)** refers to images and videos depicting the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Not only do these images and videos document victims' exploitation and abuse, but when these files are shared across the internet, child victims suffer re-victimization each time the image of their sexual abuse is viewed. Offenders may use gaming platforms to identify, groom and manipulate children before directing them to other platforms to abuse them.

Skill Building

- ✦ **Empowerment.** Teach your child to recognize when something feels wrong, leave uncomfortable situations and ask for help. Walk through different scenarios and practice how to respond to uncomfortable or threatening situations.
- ✦ **Asking for Help.** Most children and teens who experience online exploitation do not immediately tell a trusted adult. Fear, embarrassment, shame, concern about getting in trouble, or worry about losing access to devices often prevent disclosure. Help your child understand they can come to you without fear of punishment if something happens online. Reinforce that their safety is always more important than any mistake they think they've made.



Tangible Steps



IDENTIFY THREE TRUSTED ADULTS.

Help your child identify three trusted adults they can turn to if something happens, making sure they come from different parts of their life, such as family, school, or sports. Reach out together to let those adults know they have been chosen. Sometimes children find it easier to talk to another trusted adult than a parent, and that is a healthy part of their support system.



PRACTICE ASKING FOR HELP.

Role-play how your child could tell an adult about an uncomfortable online interaction.



CREATE A FAMILY SAFETY PLAN.

Create a family gaming agreement and safety plan. Decide together how your child will respond if something goes wrong online. Include who they can talk to, when to leave or block an interaction, how to report concerns and where to ask for help.



SHARE REPORTING AND SUPPORT RESOURCES.

Review reporting resources together and save them somewhere your child can easily access.

➔ NCMEC CyberTipline

[CyberTipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org)

Report suspected online child sexual exploitation.

➔ Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces

[ICACtaskforce.org](https://www.icactaskforce.org)

Find your state or local ICAC Task Force for law enforcement assistance.

➔ NCMEC Victim & Family Support

[NCMEC.org/Support](https://www.ncmec.org/support)

Get information and support for children and families impacted by online exploitation.

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