Common Sense on Gaming

Do you give high scores to your kids' games?

Never before have kids spent so much time (and money) gaming. Some gaming encourages creativity in wonderful ways — with music and art — or can help deepen a child's interest in science and history. But most of the favorites consist of kill-or-be-killed action. It's tough not to feel like an outsider when you watch your kids play some of the more advanced games.

Some facts

78% of teens play online games (*Pew, 2009*).

More Americans play video games than go to movies (*NPD Group, 2009*).

In 2009, females comprised 28% of console-game players (*NPD Group, 2009*).

National retailers enforced their store policies by refusing to sell M-rated video games to minors 80% of the time (*Federal Trade Commission, 2008*).

Teens who played games with more civic learning opportunities are more likely to give or raise money for charity and to volunteer (*Pew and Mills College, 2008*).

What is it?

Games come from all directions. There are the handheld devices like Gameboy, the Nintendo DS, and PlayStation Portable, as well as consoles like the Xbox360, PlayStations 2 and 3, and the Wii. Of course, there are online games on kids' favorite websites, as well as downloadable games for the PC, the iPhone, the iPad, and smart phones.

How do you know if games are okay for your kids to play? Handheld and console video games carry age ratings from the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, as do online games that require a software installation. But online games with no software remain unrated. Multi-player online games involve communicating with other people — which raises the risk of inappropriate contact. The age ratings at the App Store can be unreliable, so use Common Sense App ratings instead. Find them online at **www.commonsense.org.**

Why it matters

Your kids love gaming. It is likely one of their favorite pastimes, and it brings them together with friends to play. Electronic games grow more creative and sophisticated every year. But you should pay attention for two big reasons: violence and addiction. As kids get older, games get more violent. They put young people behind the trigger and encourage them to cause as much damage as possible. The new Wii controllers work by motion sensor so your children actually make a stabbing or slicing motion to spear or slice someone on screen. This violent interaction affects kids. Studies have shown that playing violent games increases aggression and decreases sensitivity to others.

Also, kids don't have "off" switches in their heads until their late teens, so they can — and will — play games for hours without stopping. Gaming addiction is very real and can harm kids' health, school performance, and social maturity. If that's not enough, gaming is not a cheap pastime. Online games have subscriptions (or lots of ads), and console and handheld games can cost up to $60 per game.

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Tips for all kids

» **Make sure games are age-appropriate.** Know the content of what your kids play, both at home and at friends' houses.

» **Establish limits.** Be firm from the beginning about how much time kids can play. Some parents set an overall daily media usage time and let kids decide which of the many forms of media they wish to use on a given day. Of course, be very clear about what games your kids can play.

» **Find good stuff.** While it might seem like kids' video games are all about shooting, you can find games that provide rich, engaging experiences that broaden kids' horizons. Common Sense Media is a great place to start finding these games.

» **Be aware of multiplayer options.** Games often involve some form of player interaction, multiplayer gaming, or player-generated content that kids can upload and download. Watch out for open chat and user-generated content that isn't monitored.

» **Talk about online ads.** Most online games offer lots of free giveaways and downloads that are often full of spyware and malware and will crash your computer sooner or later.

» **Get screen savvy.** Games are available on every device that has a screen — including phones. And screens are everywhere. Count that screen time toward your kids' total game playing for the day.

Tips for preschoolers and elementary school kids

» **Choose wisely.** Look for games that are educational and stimulating.

» **Be there for preschoolers.** Sit alongside your preschoolers to help guide them and explain what the game is asking them to do.

» **Restrict online communications.** Many games for elementary-aged kids offer online components like chat. We don't recommend these features for young children. If they are offered, you can usually disable them.

» **Carefully consider game site subscription fees.** Many online games charge a fee instead of showing ads. There are pros and cons to paying, but either way your kids will beg to join if their friends use the site. It's your money, so check out the site yourself to see if it's worth the price.

Tips for middle school kids

» **Set multiplayer controls you're comfortable with.** Preteen and teen games offer additional player interaction, multiplayer action, or player-generated content that kids can upload and download. But these features can be controlled by the player, so set the controls you are comfortable with.

» **Watch language.** The language in multiplayer games can get pretty intense. If you aren't comfortable with what you hear, use the parental controls that disable online play.

» **Be on the lookout for violence.** Violence ramps up quickly in these games. Check what your kids are playing and limit those games that you feel are excessively violent.

Tips for high school kids

» **Be aware of highly addictive games.** Games like Halo 3 allow kids to play against others anywhere in cyberspace. They are designed to take up tons of time, and it's up to you to curb it. As with any battle you may have with your children, you have your work cut out for you.

» **Stay involved.** Continue to talk to teens about their gaming lives and look for games that help reinforce your family's values.

» **Watch spending.** Games are expensive, and many offer in-game purchases. Talk to your teens about how much money they're spending on gaming, and whether that money could be better spent elsewhere.