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Office of Protection of Children

P.O. Box 479 • Dubuque, Iowa 52004-0479
Phone (563) 556-2580 FAX (563) 556-5464
www.dbqarch.org

Preventing Cyberbullying in Online Gaming, Part 1

By [Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D.](#)

Online gaming is a huge part of daily life for many teens. It's a great way for them to interact with one another, enjoy leisure time, get caught up in an epic storyline and develop skills related to personal and professional success—such as focus, determination and creativity. Our most recent research from 2015 indicates that 76 percent of youth surveyed own a gaming console, and 58 percent of kids play online every day. Interestingly, almost 39 percent consider themselves a “gamer” and fewer than 23 percent stated, “I don't really play video games.” Based on the research, the vast majority do play video games, they are reasonably proficient and they allow their gaming to make up a meaningful portion of their lives.



There are a few game consoles that currently dominate the market, and kids also love their handheld devices to meet their gaming needs. The types of games include boxed games, digital downloads, subscriptions, “free-to-play” games, free apps, and social networking games.¹

We want youth to have an enjoyable online gaming experience, but there seems to be scarce information out there for caring adults and youth about how to promote healthy interactions through gaming and prevent harmful ones. To be sure, a meaningful amount of information is being circulated with regard to smart social media use; however, kids and the adults who care for them are comparatively less informed about gaming safety practices. As such, we want to provide some strategies you can employ to help kids interact and participate in online gaming with wisdom, discretion and with various protections in place. None are overly complicated, but they do require some time to understand and then convey in a gentle but persuasive manner. We hope you find them useful in your interaction with youth as you work to do all you can to reduce the risk of victimization in their connected gaming environments.

For the youth in your care, develop an interest in their online activities

First and foremost, if adults have youth within their care, they should get involved in the youths' online activities. Caring adults and parents can do this by engaging in a conversation with their kids about their online gaming practices, experiences, successes

and struggles. It is necessary to learn about what game(s) the child is playing so you can evaluate the content for yourself.

CommonSenseMedia.org is a great way to obtain detailed reviews on certain games before giving the child permission to play them.² For example, a quick Internet search revealed that one of the most popular video games among teens is “Not For Kids” and is rated “Age 18+.”³

Actively playing video games with the child is a great “quality time” investment because it promotes bonding, cultivates a shared interest, allows you to enter their world and provides some informal deterrence and monitoring without appearing too intrusive. The following is a story from the mother of a 13-year-old boy in Florida who became aware of another user’s bad behavior just by playing the game with her son and also by being around him while he played:

My son was playing a game League of Legends. It seemed ok at first; I even played a little with him, the person was mad because of how the game was going. I was just a desk away and saw tears rolled off his cheek. When I asked what was said he showed me the screen and WOW. I myself have never met anyone so vulgar in my life, the person went on and on saying how he would murder and hunt his family down. The reporting system for that game goes only as far as putting them on ignore, when you try to contact the company about this person they simply said, ‘Ignore that person.’ Ignore someone who talks in great detail how and what he would do to a member of a child's family? Found out this happens all the time, and the company cares nothing about it, in fact most games of those type all have the same kind of people and muting them doesn't stop it. Week of sending emails to a few of these "Games" and I get the same response ‘Mute or stop playing.’ What about getting rid of these people who think having online access is a right to treat anyone like total garbage! Need better laws or some tools to police what these people say. We have neighborhood watch programs why can't we have volunteer moderators watching in game chats? It's not safe for any child to play any game with chat features.

Talk to your kids about the reality of trolls

If you are not familiar with the term, a troll is someone who instigates arguments or upsets others online by making “inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic” comments with the intent to provoke the readers of these comments.⁴ Chances are, if you’ve played an interactive game with others via a console or computer, you’ve been exposed to trash talking, insults, obscenities, sexual comments, racial epithets and other forms of harassment. It is inevitable that a child will deal with this if he or she is playing the most popular games teens and younger youth enjoy. Adults should help children fully understand that “trolls” are there to push the youths’ emotional buttons through inflammatory comments and demonstrate power and superiority over them. That being said the time worn adage, “do not feed the trolls” is true. Adults should remind kids to never give trolls a reaction because that is exactly what they’re looking for. Instead, kids

should ignore, block and report any users who abuse them verbally (or otherwise compromise their gaming experience) while online. Alternatively, kids might try to “dish it back” to the trolls to show that the derogatory comments don’t bother them, but sometimes that doesn’t stop the problem and may even make it worse. It is best, therefore, for kids to simply refrain from responding at all, similar to the experience highlighted below:

While racing and winning (I am quite good at racing games in general) I got into what seemed like a normal conversation with one of my opponents. Our conversation had led to where we lived. It was just after Hurricane Katrina. I told him that I lived in New Orleans, and he immediately came in with some of the most hateful, ignorant and racist speak I’ve ever had directed toward me. So this guy was the very definition of a troll. Losing at a racing game was so important to him that he decided to be as hateful as humanly possible toward a complete stranger. If I only somewhat avoided online games up until that point, I now never play online unless it’s with people I personally know.

Set limits

Next, it's important for parents to limit the number of hours a child can play online. Caring adults should also strive to have children engage in a range of activities to make them well rounded. This is a developmental time period when children can learn discipline and balance, as well as learn how to prioritize in order to not become caught up in hobbies that undermine academic pursuits. In addition, there's also a real concern about repetitive stress injuries and disruption in sleep patterns due to excessive gaming and screen usage. So, the bottom line is to set rules and stick to them.

In Part 2 of our article we will provide strategies specific to rating systems, passwords, blocking and reporting individuals, mods and updated console software. They will add to the toolbox of tips to help the youth in your care to stay safe while remaining active in their online gaming experiences.

References:

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3. <https://www.common sense media.org/game-reviews/assassins-creed-iii>
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