



# Helping our kids safely navigate video games.

A TELUS Wise® parent's guide.

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Video games have become an essential part of kids' lives with nearly all young people playing electronic games at least occasionally. In fact, after watching YouTube and TV (and after social media for older kids), gaming is the next most popular activity for youth.\*

Despite their popularity, many parents feel they don't know enough about the video games their kids are playing and some worry about the role gaming plays in their childrens' lives. Fortunately, there are steps parents can take to make sure video games play a positive role and are a fun part of family life as well.

\* MediaSmarts' 2018 report, The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families.



## What's good about video games

- When played together with family and friends, video games can provide the same benefits of traditional play, like teaching cooperation and encouraging socialization. There's also evidence to suggest that moderate amounts of game play is connected to lower risk of depression in children.<sup>1</sup>
- Video games can help kids develop skills in areas like reading, math, problem-solving and collaboration. Girls who play video games are three times more likely to pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).<sup>2</sup>
- Video games can serve to make children more comfortable with technology, encourage self-esteem, civic participation, or participation in related offline activities like art and sports.
- Esports are professional video game competitions and hugely popular among gamers. Similar to traditional sporting leagues, the chances are low to “go pro”, but those who do can win scholarships, sponsorships, cash prizes and more.
- Youth can make their own video games! There are lots of coding and programming tools that youth can use to develop and remix games, and play and share games made by other kids - Scratch is a good example.

## Parents' concerns about video games

- **Content:** depending on the age of your child, content may be a top concern. Younger children have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy, making them more vulnerable to frightening or violent gaming content. Whereas older kids who are active in video game chats may come across racist, sexist and/or homophobic speech, and mature themes like violence and sexual content.
- **Cyberbullying:** most online gaming forums, multiplayer games and their chats are often not moderated so there's a risk to witnessing or experiencing cyberbullying and cruel behaviour.
- **Time spent:** the amount of time kids and teens spend playing video games can become an issue for some, especially with online role-playing or multiplayer games.



1: Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204-215. doi:10.1177/0956797616678438.

2: Hosein, A. (2019). Girls' video gaming behaviour and undergraduate degree selection: A secondary data analysis approach. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 91, 226-235. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.001.

# Managing healthy video game play

## Consider time spent

Managing screen time is important when it comes to video game play, but it's not just the amount of time spent that matters. It's also important to consider *when* youth are playing online games. Research suggests that the negative effects of gaming occur much sooner during weekdays (after 1 hour and 45 minutes of gameplay) as opposed to the weekends (after 3 hours and 35 minutes).<sup>3</sup>

For more information on managing screen time, see the TELUS Wise tip sheet [Tips on managing screen use in your home](#).

## Balance achievements with breaks

The feeling of achievement that good video games provide can also be part of why youth don't want to stop playing. Encourage your kids to end a gaming session when they've accomplished something big rather than continuing to play.

## Consider the psychology

Help youth recognize the ways that video games are designed to keep us playing. For example, learning new abilities within the game, unlocking new areas to explore, and doing repetitive tasks to earn more points can keep us coming back for more. This is especially true in multiplayer games where we may feel like we owe it to other players to be there more often.

## Content considerations

Before allowing your child access to a video game, check its rating with the [Entertainment Software Rating Board \(ESRB\)](#) and read reviews on [Common Sense Media](#). You can also view YouTube videos of actual gameplay to build familiarity with the game, its objectives and content.

Keep in mind that some of the most popular games are actually gaming platforms that allow users to create their own content which impacts the ability for parents to know exactly what their kids may come across while playing.

Additionally, with the emergence of virtual reality gaming, where players are immersed in a life-like, three-dimensional digital world and have the opportunity to virtually engage with other players, it's even more important to talk to children about acceptable online behaviours and what they should do if they encounter anything inappropriate like sexually explicit content or abusive language.

## Violence and mature themes

Mature content, including violence, is prominent in many video games, making it important for parents to help their children choose age-appropriate games. Unfortunately, video game developers often assume that kids – especially boys – will only play games that contain violence; however, most research shows that youth actually look for characters who overcome problems, and there are many games that feature these kinds of challenges and problem-solving.<sup>4</sup>

**Tip:** many libraries have video games available to borrow so you can try a game before you decide whether it's appropriate and worth buying.

3: Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204-215 doi:10.1177/0956797616678438.

4: Götz, Maya. "Girls and Boys on Television." International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), 2008.

## Other considerations

- **In-app purchases:** most games are free to play, but require payment for a “premium” membership to access the entire game, or the game encourages kids to buy items that help them win or change how their character looks. Make sure your kids understand that these upgrades cost real money and to always ask before buying anything online.
- **Advertising:** many games also contain advertising aimed at kids. Refer to the tip sheet [Talking to kids about advertising](#) to help them spot ads and recognize the tactics used to influence purchases.
- **Educational value:** look for games that require the player to use strategy and problem-solving skills. It’s a bonus if the game has an educational component and reinforces key concepts being taught at school, like math, spelling or science.
- **Social value:** games that involve two or more players are great for encouraging cooperative play and making online gaming a social activity among youth and their peers.

**Before you allow your child to play any video games that you’re unfamiliar with, that are unrated or contain user-generated content, ask them:**

- What do you know about this game?
- What do you think you will like about it?
- Do any of your friends play it?
- Have you heard about anything in the game that might be upsetting or inappropriate?
- What should you do if you come across anything upsetting or inappropriate?

**Co-viewing is another great way to approve video games and their content.** Co-viewing can mean playing alongside your children, and talking to your kids about their experiences within the game. For more tips on how to do this, see the tip sheet [co-viewing with your kids](#).



## Navigating bullying

Cyberbullying (which can be referred to as “trolling” or “pranking” in video games) can occur more frequently in multiplayer games. Most multiplayer games do offer a “Report a player” or “Report bad behaviour” function that enables you or your child to notify the gaming moderator or service provider about inappropriate behaviour, and in some cases the offender’s account may be suspended or revoked. This is the fastest way to address cyberbullying in online games.

## Encourage respect and fair game play

Remind your kids that the other players in online games are real people (this can be easy to forget when you can’t see the other players or hear their tone of voice) and to always treat others with respect online, just as they would face-to-face in real life. Make sure your kids understand that even though it may seem like it’s “just part of the game”, bullying and cruel behaviour online is never okay.

## Sexual exploitation

Online predators and sexual exploitation are not common on gaming platforms, but as with other aspects of our digital world, there is the risk. Always ensure that younger kids keep chat functions turned off when playing online games so they’re unable to communicate with people who they don’t know in real life.

## Avoiding inappropriate content

- Younger kids mostly want to play video games online with friends they already know in real life. If your kids want to chat with their friends in an online game, have them communicate on a private channel, like FaceTime or Messenger Kids.
- It’s also recommended for younger children that you disable the chat function within the game entirely so they’re unable to communicate with other players - especially players who they don’t know face-to-face in real life.
- Set up a gaming area in a common space in your home so you can more easily see and hear what your kids are doing and what they’re experiencing while they game.
- If players are talking aloud to each other, you can connect your gaming system to a speaker so you can hear what’s being said.
- If you do enable the chat function in your kids’ game, help them understand how they can protect their privacy online and talk about what information is okay to share online and what is not (like their date of birth, home address and the school they go to).



## Is gaming a problem for your child?

Video games are associated with a number of benefits; however, those who spend a very large amount of time playing video games can experience negative effects.

A good indicator that gaming has become problematic is when it begins to impair daily functioning or has a significant negative impact on one's life. Compulsive gamers don't really enjoy gaming, but use games to enhance their mood or just feel "normal." They often lie to others about how much they play and make unsuccessful attempts to curb their video game playing.

If your child answers "Yes" to one or more of the following questions, it's recommended you begin to monitor the situation closely. If you suspect that video game play has become problematic you may want to consider counseling to help your child manage their gaming habits.

- Do you spend an increasing amount of time playing video games?  Yes  No
- Do you try to control, cut back or stop playing video games, or play for longer than you planned to?  Yes  No
- Do you get restless or irritated when you can't play video games?  Yes  No
- Do you play video games more often when you feel bad (sad, angry or nervous) or have problems?  Yes  No
- Do you skip school or other commitments so that you can play video games?  Yes  No
- Do you ignore homework, go to bed late, or spend less time with family and friends because of your video game playing?  Yes  No
- Do you ever hide your video game playing from your family or friends?  Yes  No



## Engage in ongoing conversations

The best thing parents can do to help their kids safely navigate video games is engaging in ongoing conversation with their kids about their digital lives. Talk to your kids about all of their experiences with video games – both positive and negative.

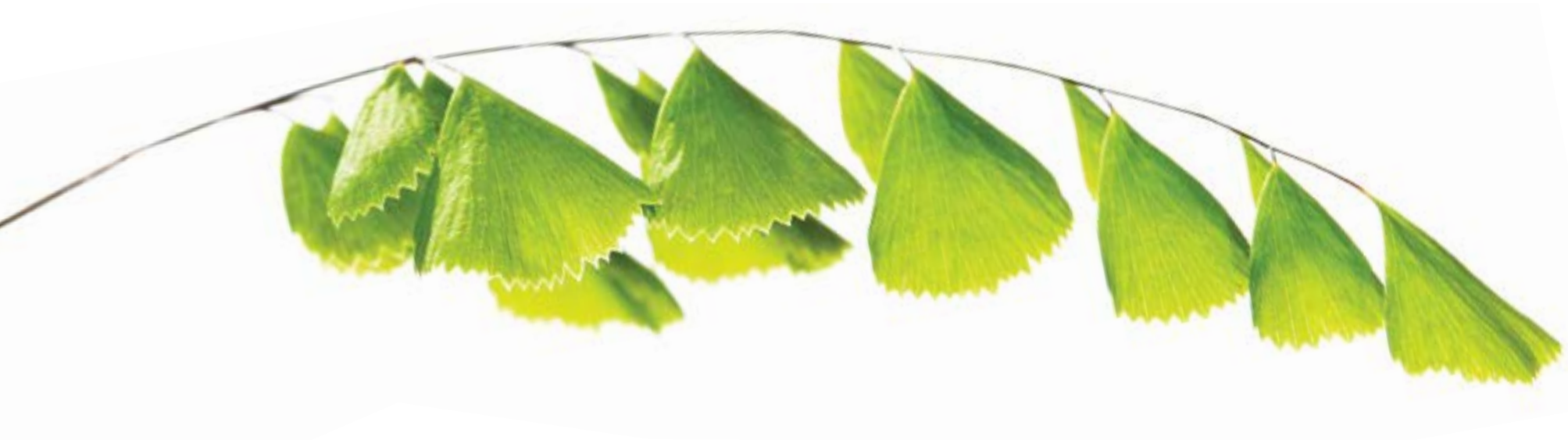
If something does go wrong, make it clear that you won't take away their device and make them stop playing the game (youth will often put up with harassment and discomfort than risk their parents taking the game away).

As with all online media, make sure your kids know that they can come to you right away if they see or hear anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable.

To find more resources on keeping your family safe in our digital world, visit [MediaSmarts.ca](https://MediaSmarts.ca) or [telus.com/Wise](https://telus.com/Wise).







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