Helping our kids safely navigate video games.

A TELUS Wise® parent's guide.

Video and computer games have become an essential part of kids' lives: nearly all young people play electronic games at least occasionally. In fact, after watching YouTube/TV (and after social media for older children), gaming is the next most popular activity for youth, according to MediaSmarts' 2018 report, titled The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families.

Many parents, though, feel they don't know enough about the games their children are playing, and worry about the role gaming plays in their children's lives. Fortunately, there are steps parents can take to make sure that video games are a positive part of their kids' lives, and a fun part of family life as well.
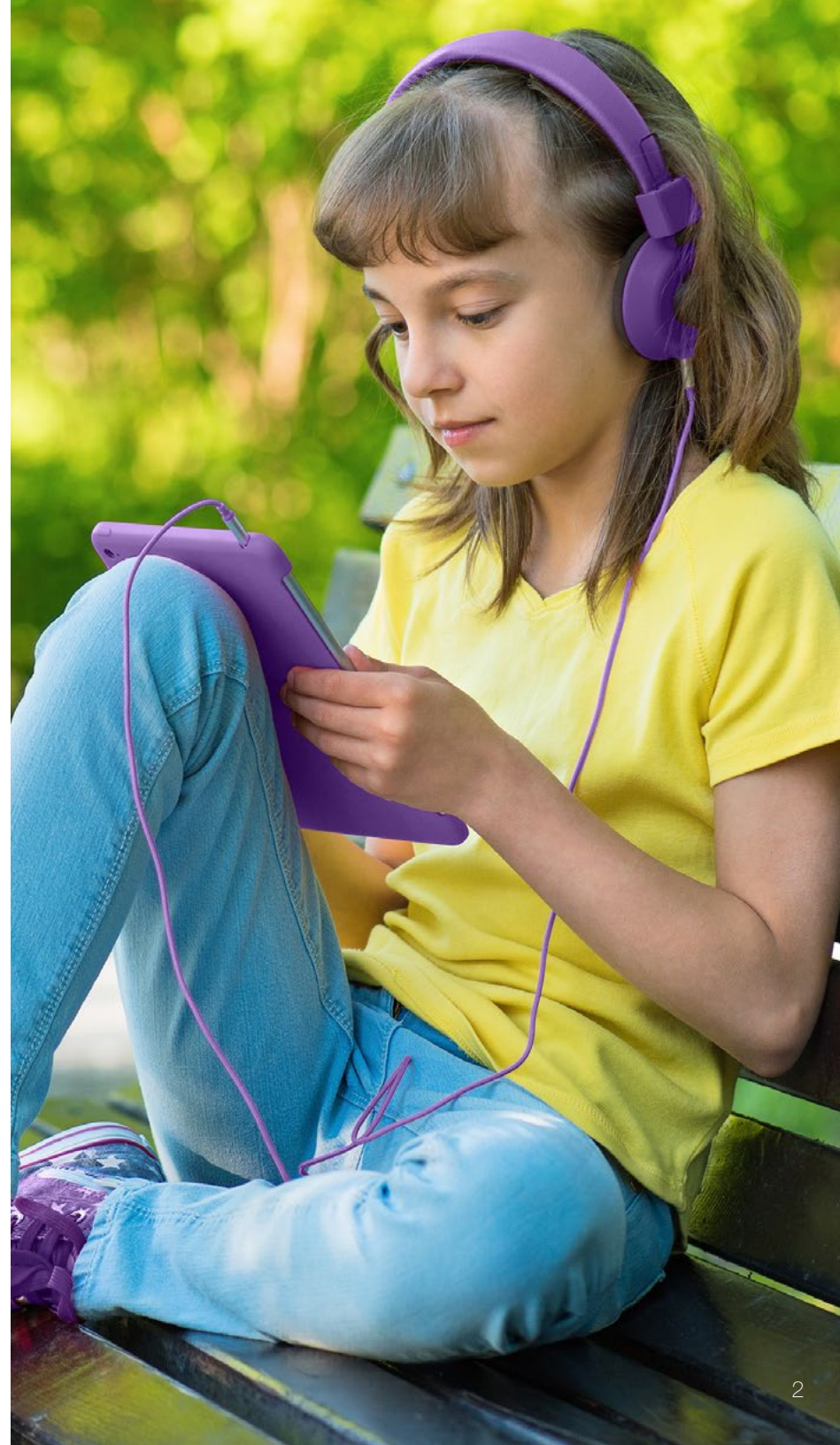
Consider what's good about video games

- When played together with family and friends, games can provide a lot of the same benefits of traditional play, such as teaching cooperation and encouraging socialization.

- Games can help kids develop skills in areas such as reading and math, as well as problem-solving and collaboration. Interestingly, girls who play video games are three times more likely to pursue science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees.[1]

- They can serve to make children more comfortable with technology and encourage self-esteem. In some cases they may encourage civic participation, or participation in related offline activities such as art or sports.

- Some games give youth an opportunity to be creative, and even collaborate or share their creations with others. Examples of such games include Minecraft and Roblox.

- Moderate amounts of game play are connected to lower risk of depression in children.[2]

- There is some evidence that multi-player video games can help build empathy in children.[3]

Parents' concerns about video games

- **Content:** young children have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy, making them more vulnerable to frightening and violent gaming content. This becomes more of a concern as computer graphics and special effects become more realistic.

- **Cyberbullying:** multiplayer games are one of the few online spaces where children often interact with people they don't know and often, many players – both adults and young people – engage in cyberbullying through online gaming platforms. Because the content is often not moderated, it isn't uncommon to see and hear of cyberbullying, racist, sexist and homophobic speech in some game forums and chat channels.

- **Time:** in 2018, the World Health Organization classified gaming addiction as a disorder, acknowledging the many symptoms excessive gaming can have and its ability to interfere with daily life. While there is some debate over whether or not there is sufficient evidence to support this decision, the amount of time children and teens spend playing games can become an issue for some, especially with online role-playing or multiplayer games.

Sexual exploitation:

Fortunately, online predators do not often seek out victims in online games and sexual exploitation is not common on gaming platforms. It has happened, however, especially because online games provide the means for youth to interact with other players who they don't know offline.

Ensure that younger children keep chat and similar functions turned off when playing online games, and if you have older children, check out the tip sheet **"Online sexual exploitation: who is at risk?"** to find out what makes some youth more vulnerable to grooming by online predators.

1: 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

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

3: Greitemeyer, T. (2013). Playing Video Games Cooperatively Increases Empathic Concern. Social Psychology, 44(6), 408-413. doi:10.1027/1864-9335/a000154

How to manage healthy video game play

Time:

A small number of youth do engage in compulsive gaming, but for most children this isn't an issue. While playing for moderate amounts of time is associated with a number of benefits, those who spend a very large amount of time playing games do show negative effects. The time of day/week that games are played should also be considered: the point where benefits stop and negative effects start occurs much earlier on weekdays than weekends. For weekdays, research suggests this occurs after one hour and forty minutes of gameplay, whereas on weekends, this occurs after three hours and thirty-five minutes.[4]

For general information on managing kids' screen use, see the tip sheet **Tips on managing screen use in your home**.

Is your child a problem gamer?

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, instead they use games to enhance their mood or just feel "normal." As well, compulsive gamers often lie to others about how much they play and will make unsuccessful attempts to curb playing.

If your child answers "Yes" to one or more of the following questions, you should begin to monitor the situation closely and consider counselling for compulsive gaming.

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 work 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

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

Content:

Before allowing your child access to an online game, check its rating with the **Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)**. You can also read reviews on **Common Sense Media** to see concerns from other parents about a game. You can also view YouTube videos of actual gameplay in action, to build familiarity with the game, its objectives and content.

Note that many online games are not yet rated by the ESRB, and some of the most popular games such as Roblox are actually game platforms that allow users to create their own gaming content.

Before you allow your child to play a game that is unrated or contains user-generated content, ask your child:

- 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?

Other content considerations include:

1. Advertising and in-app purchases: most games aimed at kids are free to play, but either require you to pay for a "premium" membership to access the whole game, or the game encourages kids to buy items within the game that help them win or change how their character looks. Make sure your kids understand that these things cost real money and to always ask before buying anything online.

Many games also contain advertising aimed at kids. Use the tip sheet **Talking to kids about advertising** to help them spot ads and recognize the tactics used to influence purchases.

2. Violence: mature content, including violence, is prominent in many games, making it important for parents to help their children choose age-appropriate games. Unfortunately, as is the case with other media, video game developers often assume that kids – especially boys – will only play games that contain violence. In fact, research has shown that what both boys and girls look for in media is characters who overcome problems, so if you prefer to limit violent content in your home you can find games that feature these kinds of challenges and problem-solving.[5]

3. Educational value: find games that require strategy and problem-solving skills. It's a bonus if they have an educational component and reinforce key concepts being taught at school, like math, spelling or science.

4. Social value: look for games that involve two or more players to encourage cooperative play and make game-playing a social activity.

Avoid inappropriate content with the following tips:

- With younger children, make sure that "chat" functions (that allow them to communicate with other players) are turned off, and tell them not to turn them back on.

- If you choose to allow the chat function, help children understand how they can protect their privacy online; talk about what information should be kept private, as opposed to what is ok to discuss online.

- Set up your child's gaming area in a common space in your home so you can more easily see what your child is doing.

- If the game has sound and/or players are talking to each other, consider connecting your gaming system / computer to the speakers in your home so you can hear what is being said.

- As with all online media, make sure your kids know to come to you right away if they ever see anything that frightens or upsets them.

It's also recommended that you co-view games with your kids. That doesn't just mean playing with your children (though that's also a good idea). Co-viewing can mean talking to your kids about their experiences within the game and keeping an eye out for things like violence or stereotyping. For more tips on how to do this, see the tip sheet **Co-viewing with your kids.**

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

Bullying and behaviour:

If your kids are playing multiplayer games, make sure you've set expectations with them about how to behave towards other people online and what to do if people online are mean to them.

Be aware that cyberbullying (sometimes called "griefing," "trolling" and "pranking") can occur more frequently in multiplayer games. That said, most multiplayer games offer a "Report a player" or "Report bad behaviour" function that enable you or your child to notify the moderator or service provider so the offender's account can be suspended or revoked. This is the fastest way to address cyberbullying in online games, and if required parents can also follow up with an email or phone call.

Additionally, ensure your children understand that it is never ok to be mean or cruel online, even though it may seem like its "just part of the game". Consider taking the **TELUS Wise Digital Pledge** with your children to help encourage them to be mindful about treating others with respect online, just as they do face-to-face.

Ongoing conversations:

Remind your children that they can always come to you if they encounter inappropriate language or cruel behaviour from other players, or if they see something in their online game that makes them feel uncomfortable. Make it clear that you will not take away their device and make them stop playing the game (youth will often put up with harassment/discomfort rather than risk giving up a game). Talk to your kids about all of their experiences gaming – both positive and negative – and have ongoing conversations about their online activity in general.

To find more resources on keeping your family safe in our digital world, visit the **MediaSmarts** or **TELUS Wise** websites.
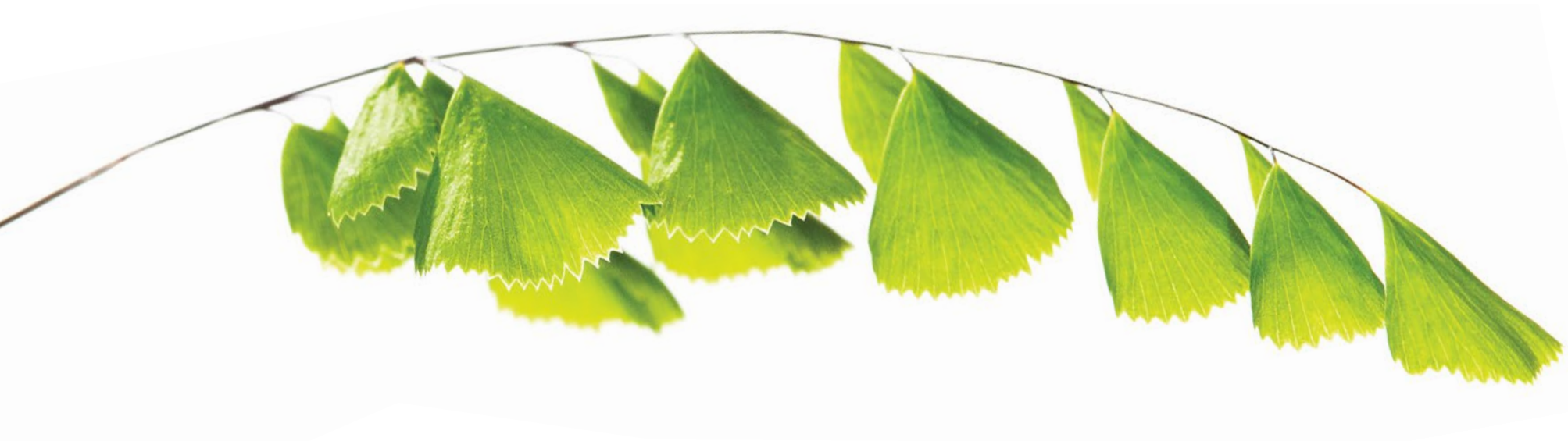
How you can participate in TELUS Wise

- Visit **telus.com/wise** to learn more.

- Book a free in-person TELUS Wise workshop for your child's school and/or parent group.

- Take the TELUS Wise Digital Pledge at **telus.com/digitalpledge**.

- Contact us at **wise@telus.com**.

- Join the conversation online with **@TELUS** on Twitter and using **#TELUSWise**.