The popularity of digital games has exploded. From playing games on your smartphone to connecting with gamers across the world, gaming has become part of our lives. The technology of games is now so good that you can spend more and more time in these online worlds.

According to a recent study, the total number of people around the world who play games is more than **1.2 billion!** That is 17% of the world's population. So it's important to take a closer look at the positive and negative aspects of online games:

Pros	Cons
Gaming can be a very social activity when playing against/with friends or online with other people	On the other hand, many games are for single players and can be isolating if played for a long time
Games can be educational, teaching you knowledge in a fun and playful way	When gaming you are constantly using your eyes, thumbs or wrists, often without a break. This could lead to strain
They can improve skills such as eye-hand coordination, problem solving, and strategic thinking...	Games do take a lot of hours to complete and can be quite addictive. It is important to find a balance when gaming
Online gaming gives you the opportunity to meet new people from around the world and chat to them while gaming	Talking to people you don't know online can be a risk as you can never be 100% sure who you are talking to. Be careful when giving out personal information of any kind
The variety of games on the market is growing daily and. You can play games of all kinds from cooking games to action games, and many of them are FREE	Although many games are free, a lot of them have ways for you to pay for things in the app like upgrades, to unlock levels, or get extra lives. This can get quickly get expensive

You may also be tempted to play games above your age rating. This can lead to you seeing inappropriate or upsetting content.

For more information on these pros and cons, check out the following links:

www.childnet.com/ufiles/Online-gaming.pdf

www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/hot-topics/gaming

www.getsafeonline.org/protecting-yourself/online-gaming

Multiplayer games

When chatting to other players on multiplayer games that you haven't met offline, be aware of the following:

- Bear in mind that not everything they say is necessarily true (they might be a different gender or age…)

- Never share any of your personal information (address, phone number, bank details…)

- Don't get pressured into using your webcam when gaming or chatting if you're not comfortable doing so

- If the person you are chatting to makes you feel uncomfortable in any way be sure to report and block them (most games have these options)

Multiplayer games mean that you can talk to lots of other players at the same time. But there can be pitfalls. If you are upset by any of the language or behaviour you come across, such as 'griefing' or cyberbullying, follow these steps:

- Remember you can always leave that game

- Report or block the player. This will mean that you can continue to play but can't be contacted by that player (most games have a guide to block or report bad gaming behaviour like 'griefing')

- Talk to someone, such as a trusted adult or friend, who can help you

- Mute your mic – this will mean that you can continue to play without the chat function

- Contact NSPCC for help or further advice on 0808 8005002 or call ChildLine on 0800 1111

Frequent Use

Make sure you moderate the time you spend gaming. Gaming is there to have fun and help you gain different kinds of skills. Be aware that as soon as you are not in control of the game- and it is in control of you- you might want to think about limiting your gaming time.

Paying for add-ons

A lot of games are free, but there are things you can buy inside the game which can get expensive quickly:

- Think twice before paying to unlock a level or getting extra lives – costs can quickly spiral out of control
- Don't give away bank details – of you or a family member- without checking with a trusted adult first.

Age ratings

There is a reason that age ratings exist – they are designed to protect younger players and make sure they're not badly affected by the game's content. Make sure you look at the age rating before playing and keep an eye out for younger players who might not know what effect playing overage games can have.

More Info

www.antibullyingpro.com

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

www.childnet.com

You can call ChildLine anytime on 0800 11 11- calls are free and confidential. Visit www.childline.org.uk for more information.

Your child has taken part in a *Be Strong Online* session, helping young people to support each other with some of the challenges they face online. One of the topics we've discussed is digital gaming.

In 2015 Ofcom's report on children's media use found that on average, young people aged 12 to 15 spend more than 12 hours per week gaming. With Minecraft[1] increasingly used in education and Pokémon GO[2] making near-constant headlines when launched in July 2016, digital gaming is a massive part of many children's lives. So it's normal for parents to worry about things like the amount of time children spend gaming, the possibility of in-game spending, whether their child's favourite games will expose them to inappropriate content or contact with strangers.

Gaming has also been linked with lots of benefits, from better memory[3] and problem-solving skills[4] to improved coordination[5] and creativity[6]. With your support and guidance, it can be a wonderful hobby for your child. Here are some top tips on helping your child play safely.

About an hour a day seems like the ideal amount of time to spend gaming, but there's no evidence that anything below three hours is harmful[7]. It's generally best to intervene if your child's gaming interferes with other things, like homework, offline friendships or getting enough sleep.

When trying to decide if a game is appropriate for your child, the PEGI (Pan European Games Information) rating is a good place to start. Have a look at the descriptors that come with the rating for more detail. If you're still not sure, it might be worth reading some reviews or having a go yourself to see what's involved.

Lots of games involve opportunities for spending or in-app purchases. It's best to agree a policy with your child – are they allowed to spend any money? Do they need to stay under a set limit? You can also use parental controls to disable or require permission for purchases.

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[1] http://www.pcgamer.com/minecraft-recreates-the-great-fire-of-london/?utm_content=buffer255b1&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=buffer-pcgamertw

[2] http://parentzone.org.uk/article/pokemon-go-parents-guide

[3] https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201410/can-action-video-games-boost-short-term-memory

[4] http://education.uconn.edu/2013/05/29/well-designed-video-games-can-enhance-problem-solving-skills-and-make-learning-more-effective/

[5] http://www.techtimes.com/articles/18125/20141019/study-finds-that-video-games-boost-eye-hand-coordination-skills.htm

[6] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/8868033/Video-gaming-children-more-creative.html

[7] http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-08-04-little-video-game-playing-linked-better-adjusted-children

Remember to mention gaming when you discuss staying safe online. Talk about things like not downloading suspicious files disguised as cheats, as well as the risks of oversharing and contact with strangers. Lots of games have moderators and tools for blocking/reporting, and it's a good idea for your child to know what they are and how to use them.

Make sure your child knows they can talk to you if they're ever worried or upset by anything. If they do come to you with a concern, try to resist banning games completely – this can feel like a punishment and discourage asking for help.

You can get more information on safer gaming here: parentzone.org.uk/article/gaming-parents-guide

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