

# Computer Games: How to help your kids play safely

**In the last 10 years, more than 335 million computer and video games have been bought in the UK, and the vast majority have been bought for children.**

But what can parents do if their child is continually asking them for the latest video game, or most of their free time is spent playing computer games? This Support Net offers some insights into how parents can help their kids play safely.



## Five top tips for parents

### 1) Watch your kids while they play

"I was shocked when I watched my son playing a fighting game. If he failed to clear a level he would get really angry. If I wanted to talk to him he would be very irritable and rude. I used to watch for those signs - frustration, aggression, rudeness - and if I felt a game was just too much for him, I'd encourage him to take time out." - Liz

**British consumers spent £435m more in stores on computer games in 2007 than they did on buying music CDs.**

### 2) Use the guidance you're given

All games sold in the UK include age ratings and most also have indicators of content on the cover (See box on page 2). In addition, there are several magazines and websites which review games.

If your kids are serious gamers, then they may already buy magazines regularly - take a few minutes to flick through one and familiarise yourself with this world. Insist that you vet any games before they are bought - and try to make sure you see any games they borrow from friends before they start playing them. Talk to the parents of your child's friends to see if you can agree a consistent approach.

**39% of teenagers aged 11-15 received a video game for Christmas last year (2007).**

### 3) Set time limits on playing games.

Agree time limits in advance according to the age of your child.

"The longer you play the lower your concentration span might be so a positive way to set time limits is to explain that to your kids. If they are stuck on a level, it might be worth them taking 'time out' to return to their challenge with a fresh mind. When they get back to the game

after a break, they'll be surprised how quickly they can overcome the obstacles which have been frustrating them." - Jon

#### 4) Play the games with your kids

Make it an activity you can do together.

"Playing games with my children is a great way to monitor what's out there. It wouldn't be fair to say 'that's unsuitable' when I have no idea what the game is about or involves. I also find it a great way to bond, especially with the vast host of

multiplayer games on the market. We often have our own family 'team' that looks out for each other and works together. It's fun to have something in common." - Matt

#### 5) Channel their game-playing positively

"As our boys enjoy sport, I try to encourage them to play some of the sporting games when there's rarely an issue over content" - Kate

If you're feeling exasperated about the amount of time your kids are spending

**59% of people aged 6-65 years (some 26.5million people) play games, with 21.6 million of these regularly playing at least once a week.**

playing games, remember that the UK is the fourth largest developer of games in the world.

Encourage your kids, if they really love gaming, to get into the techie programming side of things. They could even pursue a career reviewing games in magazines, or create games themselves. Who knows - your kids may be the next big thing in computer games!

**The UK is the Games capital of Europe. More games are sold here than any other country on the continent. The UK is also the fourth biggest developer of games after the USA, Japan and Canada and one in three games sold in Europe was made in the UK.**

## Know your age ratings

Confusingly there are two rating systems in operation in the UK at the moment. One is the Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system, which was established in 2003, and is in force across the EU. Britain's games industry took a leading role in establishing the PEGI system several years ago, overseen by the country's trade body for games publishers, ELSPA (the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association). 94% of computer games have received a PEGI rating.



The PEGI age rating system comprises two elements - an age rating, with bands set at 3+, 7+, 12+, 16+, 18+, and a series of game descriptors. These are icons, displayed on the back of the game box that describe the type of content to be found in the game, e.g. violence and bad language.

The PEGI age ratings are a guide to help parents assess the content and therefore suitability of a game for their children. The other rating system is administered by the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification), and is similar to the age ratings given to films. BBFC ratings dictate who the game can be sold to, i.e.

a '15' or '18' BBFC-rated computer game can only be sold to players that are at least 15 or 18 respectively.



The PEGI scheme is also extended to the online environment where children and young people may be playing against other children and adults. It is recommended that parents review the age certification for an online game before allowing their children to play. The PEGI Online classification should be shown on the website in question. If there's no certificate, it may be wise initially to monitor or even restrict access to the game.

## But what does it all mean?

**If you're confused by the terms used to describe computer games, this handy guide may help.**

**Arcade games** - before the advent of home computer games consoles, a number of games began in games arcades. Games which started out this way, or evoke this kind of gameplay are often referred to as arcade games, e.g. PacMan.  
**Boss** - a tougher enemy faced at the end of a level, especially in a platform style game.

**Cheats** - codes or special prizes found in the game which make the game easier, e.g. by rendering a player invincible.  
**Console** - the computer system created specifically to play your games on. The main consoles in use today are the latest incarnations of the Sony PlayStation, Microsoft X-Box 360, and the Nintendo Wii. Handheld consoles

include the Sony PSP and the Nintendo DS.

**Controller** - the device you use to play the game; controllers can be joypads or utilise wireless technology as in the Nintendo Wii.

**First person shooter** - any game where you take on a 'first person' viewpoint, i.e. what you see on the screen

is what you would see if you were playing the game for real. Many of these games involve conflict, hence the term. Some of the most well-known first person shooters include Doom, the Halo series and Gears of War.

**Gamer** - a person who plays games frequently, perhaps daily. Some 'pro-gamers' compete professionally in specially arranged tournaments for major prize money.

**Grand Theft Auto** - known as GTA, the Grand Theft Auto game series feature an antihero who steals cars and engages in other criminal behaviour. There are several GTA games and they are incredibly popular among school age teens, despite having '18' ratings. Downloadable 'mods' for GTA include sexually explicit content.

**Halo** - a classic first person shooter game, which redefined the genre due to its complicated story arc. When Halo 3 was released in 2007, it made more money in the first day it went on sale than the 3-day opening weekend for the year's biggest blockbuster, SpiderMan 3.

**Joypad** - another name for a controller; a step up from the 'joystick' used with computer games in the 1980s.

**RPG** - 'role playing game', ie a game where a player takes on a distinct, customisable personality.

**Mods** - short for 'modifications'. These are like cheats for games, but may be produced by third parties, not the game

designers. Some 'mods' include graphic levels of violence and/or sexual content.

**MMORPG** - massive multi-player online role playing game, i.e. an online game set in an entire virtual world, populated by thousands, and even millions, of players. Popular MMORPGs include World of Warcraft and Second Life.

**Parental controls** - Rules and restrictions parents and guardians can place on their children's video gaming. There are PCs for all the consoles - PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii - as well as Windows Vista. You decide what and how games can be played and for exactly how long per day, week or month.

**Platform game** - a game where you have to pass through a series of different levels or 'platforms'. Many of the classic games of the 80s and 90s were 'platformers' e.g. Super Mario Land, Sonic the Hedgehog etc.

**PlayStation** - one of the world's best-selling consoles, manufactured by Sony. The PlayStation 3 is often referred to as PS3.

**Second Life** - an online RPG, set in a virtual world based on the real world.

**Shoot 'em up** - a game with an emphasis on shooting and conflict.

**Sim** - short for 'simulation'. The first really popular 'sim' game was SimCity,

where players were responsible for planning and running their very own city. The Sims is the name of a game featuring people the player can control. Other 'sims' include military strategy games, sports management, and even the entire evolution/design of new life-forms.

**Sprite** - an on-screen character, particularly an 'enemy' which must be avoided/killed.

**Tie-in** - a computer game released at the same time as, e.g. a film.

**Wii** - Nintendo's most recent console, which has infra-red controllers instead of the usual 'joypad' used in other consoles.

**World of Warcraft** - often known as WoW or 'Warcraft', this is a multi-player online RPG, set in a virtual 'fantasy' world with battles, magic and mythical beasts.

**Xbox 360** - Microsoft's latest games console.



## Further help

### Online

Information about PEGI ratings and advice for parents about protecting your children while they are gaming online, can be found at [www.pegionline.eu](http://www.pegionline.eu)

Up-to-date, independent games reviews can be found at [www.pluggedinonline.com](http://www.pluggedinonline.com), alongside reviews of movies and music. [This is a Christian site. Its reviews are usually very thorough and helpful. It is also an American site - so it refers to American age ratings, which may differ from UK ratings.]

Care for the Family has produced a longer Support Net paper called Your

Child and the Internet. You can view this online at [www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet)

[www.askaboutgames.com](http://www.askaboutgames.com) This is a rich resource for parents, guardians and teachers about the ins and outs of ratings, parental controls, advice and a downloadable pdf.

### Books etc.

#### Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know

If you're finding setting boundaries with your children challenging, then *Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know* contains good advice.

(Also includes an entire chapter on The Internet.) Order online at [www.careforthefamily.org.uk](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk), or phone Care for the Family on (029) 2081 0800

#### Pester Power - Families Surviving the Consumer Society

Many parents find they are 'pestered' by their children for the latest computer game, or console(!). This a FREE booklet containing tips submitted by parents for parents. Order your copy online at [www.careforthefamily.org.uk/pester](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/pester) or phone (029) 2081 0800