INTERNET SAFETY PLAN

Is This Game Right For My Child?

This guide provides an overview of how to understand the content and rating of video games in order to make decisions about if/how you want each of your children to use a game.

Check the ESRB Rating

ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board) is the gold standard for game ratings that nearly all game developers adhere to. Checking the ESRB Rating will give you a great initial idea of the content contained in the game. It is comprised of 3 elements:

- **Rating Category:** General category for the age-appropriateness of the game. E (for Everyone), E (Everyone 10+), T (Teen), M (Mature 17+), A (Adults Only 18+), RP (Rating Pending).

- **Content Descriptors:** Specific types of content in the game (similar to what you see in IMDB movie and show ratings); things like violence, language, nudity, etc.

- **Interactive Elements:** Content that doesn't affect the rating but is *certainly* of interest and concern for parents. Things like In-Game Purchases, User Communication, and Unrestricted Internet Access

Check out the ESRB Ratings Guide for a deeper dive!

Image: ESRB Teen Rating. By Entertainment Software Association - ESRB Ratings Brochure, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28407671

Understand Key Online Features

$ In-game purchases

Games that require a linked credit card can lead to significant charges (intentional or accidental) for you to have to deal with

Public voice chats and private messaging can expose kids to cyberbullying, pornography, hate speech, grooming attempts, and unhealthy relationships.

Text & Voice Chat

Unrestricted Internet

Some games have browser access that may bypass your rules or display advertisements with inappropriate content

To fully understand the content of a game, you can check the ESRB Rating info, view the game's website and advertising, and/or watch videos of reviews and gameplay

Decisions, Decisions...

Now that you're familiar with the ESRB system and how to find out about a game's content and capabilities, you can evaluate the game and make a decision in accordance with your vision and goals for your Internet Safety Plan.

Does this game have...

○ An ESRB Rating (and, if so, what is it?)?

○ Educational Content?

○ Local multiplayer (to play with family/friends)?

○ Any parental control capabilities (make sure you know what exactly they are!)?

○ Online voice chat?

○ Public and/or private messaging?

○ Unrestricted browser access?

○ Violent and/or intense (bright flashes, loud noises, and other highly stimulatory designs) content?

○ Sexual content?

○ Drug references?

These questions should give you a good idea of both the positives and potential negatives of the game to give you an idea of how to proceed.

Based on your responses, make a decision! You could...

- Don't allow it to be played at all
- Allow it to be played while actively supervised in a shared space
- A mixture of any of these.

- Allow it with parental controls enabled
- Allow it to be played with strict time limits to avoid overstimulation.

There are a lot of different ways you could move forward now. It may vary child-to-child, and you may re-evaluate for the same game in a few months or a few years, so you can utilize this as often as needed

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REMINDER:
Amygdala overstimulation (caused by intense and/or excessive gaming experiences) can last up to 8 hours and result in the overstimulated child experiencing intense emotions with little-to-no capacity for logical reasoning or self-control. Make sure to factor this in and adjust your decision if you notice a child being overstimulated by a game.

Examples

Putting this into practice with some of today's most popular games so you can get a feel for how to utilize it to fit your family's situation and goals

Fortnite

ESRB Info
- Rating - **Teen**
- Content - fantasy 3rd-person shooter, high-stimulatory content, online voice chat and messaging, in-game purchases

Parental Controls - Restrict voice and text chat, block specific content, language filtering, time limits

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Fortnite is a game that exploded in popularity 5 years ago, especially in the 7-13 age range. Due to its massive popularity, many parents opt to allow their kids to play it so they don't feel left out in their friend groups.

However, due to the intensely stimulating content, it can cause challenges for young kids.

Our recommendation: Allow time-limited gameplay with parental controls restricting voice and text chat starting at **age 13**.

If you decide to allow it to be played by kids younger than 13, supervise them and see how they respond to it, and block all global chatting so that strangers can't interact with them.

Minecraft

ESRB Info
- Rating - **Everyone Ages 10+**
- Content - fantasy adventure, crafting, fighting, online voice chat and messaging, in-game purchases.

Parental Controls (via Microsoft Family) - Restrict voice and text chat, block specific in-game content, manage friends list

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Minecraft has been around since 2009 and has expanded to nearly every gaming platform around with an absurd amount of features and capabilities within the game. Its low age rating and blocky, unrealistic graphics have made it one of the most widely allowed games for young children.

While it does have fun and harmless content available, you always need to stay wary of the amount of time your children spend on it and who they're interacting with.

Our recommendation: Allow time-limited gameplay with parental controls restricting voice and text chat starting at **age 10.**

Stay aware of who they interact with and the type of games they play within Minecraft. One fun way to do this - join in and play with them sometimes!

Examples

(continued)

Call of Duty

ESRB Info
- Rating - **Mature**
- Content - blood and gore, violence, drug usage, strong language, suggestive themes, online voice chat and messaging, in-game purchases

Parental Controls - (in-game) Limit blood, gore, and adult language, disable text-chat

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There are 24 different Call of Duty games out there, but they all have the same general formula - first-person military shooters. Some are less realistic than others - with futuristic weapons, aliens, and zombies - but all of the main campaigns and multiplayer attempt to depict military combat in a realistic light. That includes all of the violence and strong language (and occasional sexual content) that you'd expect from an R-rated military movie. But due to the immersive nature and highly-stimulatory design of these games, neurological overstimulation can happen very easily.

Our recommendation: Allow kids to play Call of Duty no younger than **age 16**, and have consistent discussions with them about the content they see and experiences they have while playing.

Elden Ring

ESRB Info
- Rating - **Mature**
- Content - fantasy role-playing, blood and gore, violence, strong language, suggestive themes.

Parental Controls - [None]

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Elden Ring is very popular single-player role-playing game that features users in a fantasy realm fighting monsters and other enemies.

Role-playing games are designed to immerse players into their character's role and require significant amounts of playing time to travel through the open world environment.

Our recommendation: Allow kids no younger than **age 16** to play with strict time limits and some supervision.

Time is the biggest factor with role-playing games. The more time spent in them, the more obsessed they will get and the more likely they are to get overstimulated and experience negative consequences from their usage.

REMEMBER - Time, Talk, and Traditions

The core relational aspects of internet safety are just as -if not more - important than the technological ones. With any decision you make about a game, make sure you keep time to a healthy limit, talk with your kids about their experiences, and implement some good traditions to model and support healthy usage of the game.