

# Supporting children and young people with SEND online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) stay safe online.



## Online Gaming

As gaming has become more accessible through mobile gaming and the use of new technologies, our research shows that 95% of children and young people (CYP) play video games on and offline.

### What you need to know

How online gaming can be different for CYP with SEND – and the benefits, risks, and challenges they face.

### The benefits

- **Gaming can help with socialising.** Interest in gaming can give something to build a real-world friendship around and talk about. This is especially important for CYP who may find learning neurotypical social skills more challenging
- **Gaming can help manage moods.** For some CYP playing a short game on their devices can give them an escape
- **Gaming can help with motor skills.** Most games involve developing fine motor skills to control the game. Other games, such as those involving a touchscreen can help people develop hand-eye coordination
- **Gaming can develop creativity.** CYP may also look to create their own games and characters allowing them to be creative and broaden their skills in a particular area
- **Gaming development can be a career.** CYP may aspire to do so if they are keen on a career in gaming. [AskAboutGames 'Thriving Futures: A Rough Guide to Game Careers'](#) gives good advice on what careers are available within the gaming industry.

### The risks

From our research, we know that CYP with SEND experience greater harm online:

- **Talking to strangers** – with the rise in popularity of multiplayer games like Fortnite, the social aspect of gaming has grown. Often games provide chat features for users to interact. Our research reveals that CYP with vulnerabilities are twice as likely to experience contact with strangers and online trolling than those without vulnerabilities
- **Physical impact** - gaming is designed to keep CYP engaged so it can be hard for those with SEND to stop playing especially if it fulfills a range of needs for them. Spending long periods playing without breaks can interfere with their wellbeing
- **Increased screen time** – CYP can develop a passion for gaming and can spend many hours watching videos on how to play the game or watching live streams of others gamers playing. Sometimes these may contain inappropriate language or adult themes, particularly if they are playing games with an adult rating
- **Risk of gambling** – the use of loot boxes in games or in-game purchases where you cannot see what you are buying, can be considered a form of gambling and can encourage CYP to gamble
- **Meeting up with strangers** – it can be easy for CYP, particularly those with communications difficulties, to form strong bonds with people they play games with online especially if this is the main way that they socialise

It is important to be aware that:

- CYP with SEND are **more likely to experience all online risks** compared to those without any difficulties
- Out of the different types of risks, **CYP with SEND are significantly more likely to experience contact risks online**. Examples of this include sexting under pressure and coercion
- CYP with **communication difficulties are also more likely to experience contact risks**. They are more likely to spend time in chat rooms than their non-vulnerable peers which can facilitate direct communication and are known for explicit sexual talk, innuendos, and obscene language
- Experiencing contact risks is also associated with a **greater risk of seeing harmful content and experiencing more aggressive behaviour** from others online

## The challenges

Gaming can offer all CYP the ability to socialise, be creative, and build-up core skills. However, for those with additional learning needs, there is a need to give them extra support to spot potential online risks.

Many gamers use personas and so can make it harder for CYP to know who they are playing with and what their true intentions are. There are also ways that people interact on games that may impact their wellbeing such as the use of griefing (a type of bullying) used to win games.

Although there are no direct links between violent behaviour offline and video games it's still important to know how video games affect CYP. CYP with Autism Spectrum Disorder tend to engage in restricted and repetitive behaviors As a result, they might be at higher risk for developing [addictive game play patterns](#).

Be aware of the content in the games they play and using PEGI ratings to identify which games are age-appropriate is also key.

## Things to consider

Here are a few things to think about to support CYP:

- Combine controls with communication
- Balance online gaming with other activities
- Connecting with others so make use of privacy settings when they interact
- Stay engaged with their gameplay

## Practical steps to protect CYP

- Take an interest in the games they like to play
- Use [PEGI ratings](#) to choose games. PEGI ratings on games are essentially safety certification to provide parents with advice of what the game may content i.e. bad language, discrimination, drugs, etc
- Agree on boundaries for gameplay. To help them develop good gaming habits, agree on a set of boundaries to help them have a clear understanding of who they can play with online, what games they can play and how long they're allowed to play
- Teach them how to protect themselves. Check that you both know how to use report and block functions on the game or platform they are using if they are concerned about something they've seen
- Use on platform [safety features](#). Most consoles and platforms now have safety features that you can apply to CYP's accounts to manage screen time, access to chat features, and the games they can play



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