

Supporting LGBTQ+ children and young people online

Advice for parents and carers to help LGBTQ+ children and young people stay safe online.



Online Gaming

Online gaming is incredibly popular among children and young people. Whether it is through phones and mobile devices, PCs or games consoles, most children and young people will have experience in gaming online. However, there are some areas of gaming that could put LGBTQ+ children and young people at risk of being bullied or subjected to homophobic, biphobic or transphobic language.

What you need to know

It is important to note that although people of all genders engage with online gaming, it is and has historically been strongly male-oriented. As a result, women and girls have found that they are often targeted unfairly, and regularly face gendered abuse and sexist/misogynistic remarks and behaviours, that can be sexual in nature. Young female gamers, whether in the LGBTQ+ community or not, are [statistically at the highest risk of verbal abuse in online games](#).

The benefits

Although you might not understand your child's willingness to spend a lot of time gaming online, there is a lot to suggest that there are multiple benefits to this as a hobby. [Online gaming benefits to online gaming](#) for all young people, both those who are LGBTQ+ and those who are not – but there may be particular benefits for LGBTQ+ young people which include:

- Finding a hobby your child enjoys can be incredibly liberating for them, but especially if they are LGBTQ+. It gives them the **opportunity to develop skills such as strategy and decision making, express themselves, and converse with others with a degree of confidence**
- It can help them to **develop existing relationships with friends and peers** who enjoy the same games as them. This could mean they get to know the people in their lives better, and feel safer to come out, or embrace who they are amongst friends

- Some young people may develop online friendships with people they meet through gaming. Although that might be a concern to you, especially as it would involve them conversing with strangers, there is [evidence](#) to suggest that long lasting friendships can be made through online gaming

The risks

There are some risks that come with online gaming, predominantly revolving around hate speech, and bullying that takes place in-game.

- Bullying is a cause for concern within online gaming. International anti-bullying charity [Ditch the Label](#) found that **57%** of young people had been bullied in an online game, and this can have a considerable impact on a young person's mental health
- [Stonewall research](#) also found that **40%** of LGBT young people have specifically experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse online
- Witnessing hate speech is also a risk, especially if a LGBTQ+ child or young person is openly out within the online gaming arena. Again, **57%** of young people have been subjected to this in online gaming
- [Trolling is a difficult aspect of gaming online](#), and **64%** of young people have been trolled significantly
- **40%** of young people have also received unwanted sexual contact in an online game
- Being outed in an online gaming environment is something that LGBTQ+ children and young people are at risk of that others are not

- Having personal information shared in an online game is another general risk for children and young people, whether they share the information themselves without understanding the risks, or if others share it without their consent

It is important to be aware that:

Not all LGBTQ+ young people will want to come out as LGBTQ+ in online gaming.

- Also, LGBTQ+ children and young people are likely to play online with peers from school or hobbies as well as some who they meet through online gaming, and therefore people who might already know about their gender or sexual identity. This does not necessarily increase risk of harm, but it can mean that informing other gamers about this is out of their control
- Communicating with strangers online in any format or platform will always carry a certain amount of risk. However, the **interaction in online games can be kept brief**, and all children and young people have the ability to leave a game or match whenever they choose, regardless of the game they are playing

The challenges

Although it might feel like banning online gaming would be more beneficial for the mental and physical wellbeing of your child, this is not feasible, and there are multiple things to consider related to balancing their wellbeing with their love of this particular hobby.

- They are likely to use online gaming to **connect with friends and peers outside of school**
- **Regularly going online for gaming is social**, and they might have a community of friends there that they are unwilling to give up, especially if they are connecting with those people solely online
- **There are shortfalls in in-game reporting of cyberbullying**, and it can often be difficult to find the area within the game where reporting takes place
- **They might feel that any trolling they experience is worth putting up with** if it means they can continue playing games
- Cyberbullying in online gaming can be difficult for children and young people to identify, and it is **often passed off as “banter”**
- Specifically, for LGBTQ+ children and young people, witnessing hate speech in online games might be something they are unwilling to communicate with you for **fear of losing their hobby and community**. Also, for LGBTQ+ young people who aren't out yet,

telling someone about anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech can be intimidating because the young person may fear that doing so will mean coming out as LGBTQ+

- Finally, LGBTQ+ children and young people might feel that as long as they are not “out” online, that none of this is going to be an issue for them as no one within that environment are going to know about their sexual orientation. However, they might not understand that they do not always control the flow of their personal information online, and others “outing” them is still a risk

Things to consider

It is important to remember that your child might not even be experiencing these harms, and possibly have never witnessed bullying, hate speech or any other harm in a game before. As such, there may be nothing you need to protect them from in this case. Nevertheless, it is important to be prepared that these issues could arise at any time and having an action plan to support them can give you the confidence you need to give them the support they need.

Practical steps to help your child

There are numerous things you can do to help to protect your child from online harassment that occurs in a game, even if you cannot be there to moderate with them. Having an open conversation with them about their gaming habits, who they game with online and why they enjoy it so much is by far the best way to begin to understand them and the nature of any harassment that might occur.

Conversations to have:

- **Discuss with them what they get out of the gaming experience.** What do they enjoy? What would they change if they could? Who do they communicate with the most when they play?
- **Identify with them what kind of information they are putting out there** when they game - do they use their real name? Real age? Gender identity or sexual orientation? Remind them it's up to them what they feel comfortable sharing with others online. Also talk to them about the importance of not sharing personal or identifying information with strangers
- **Ask if they have ever witnessed bullying in online games.** Asking them directly if they have been bullied or have perpetrated bullying is not likely to elicit a truthful answer as they might be fearful that access to the game will be taken away. Instead, asking if they have ever witnessed it generally will help you gauge if it is happening where they play

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