

Crisis Connection

Video Game Safety



“Twelve percent (12%) of kids say they have played a [video] game of which their parents would disapprove, and 17% (primarily 8- to 14-year-olds) say their parents check the ratings on their video games.”

The Kaiser Family Foundation, Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year-olds, 2005

Benefits

- The interactive play that is involved in educational video games is a great way for children to learn. High-quality, interesting new games are released every year.
- Video games often get negative attention for contributing to sedentary lifestyles, but a new type of video game might actually help your child become more physically active. Exergames require players to move around (dance or kick box, for example) to do well in the game. These games can be especially useful when safety concerns or inclement weather prevent children from going outdoors, or for those children who feel self-conscious exercising in front of others.

Risks

- To enhance the players' experience, many games now allow players to talk to one another through the Internet connection that supports the games' play. This allows people to play with their friends across town, or to make new friends across the country. Unfortunately, this also opens the door for cyberbullying. Cyberbullies may take competitive teasing a step further and become downright mean to their fellow players.

Such hurtful language can have a powerful effect on teenagers who have built a social reality in the online gaming world. If you start to see in your child the traditional warning signs of being bullied (e.g., suddenly becoming withdrawn, suddenly losing interest in things he or she used to enjoy, being anxious, sad, or moody, or having trouble sleeping), don't rule out video games as a possible cause of the problem.

Ratings

- The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is the self-regulatory body created in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association to independently apply and enforce ratings, advertising guidelines, and online privacy practices for the industry. The ESRB rating system has two parts: the rating symbol and the content descriptors. There are six rating symbols and more than 30 content descriptors. The rating symbol is on the front of the package and suggests which ages the game is appropriate for. The content descriptors are on the back of the package and provide more details about the reason for the game's rating.

The ESRB rating system is meant to give parents guidance in deciding which games are appropriate for their children. It is not a substitute for researching the games and discussing the games with your children. There are many ways to learn more about the content of video games, including speaking to older children and other parents, testing the games in stores, and reading newspaper, magazine, and online reviews. Parents should also play the games with their children and supervise their children when they are playing alone or with friends or siblings. If you don't understand something that is on the screen, ask your child to explain it to you.

Almost all newer video game systems have built-in parental controls. If parents are not comfortable with their children playing games with

certain ratings, these controls can be set so games with those ratings won't play on the system. Check with the manufacturer of the video game system for more information, or ask a sales representative at the store.

What you can do

- Do your homework. Video game ratings are designed to give parents guidance, not make decisions for them. Each family and each child is different. It is up to parents to research the video games their children want to play and use this information to decide what is appropriate.
- Play the games with your child. The best way to understand your child's video game experience is to actually take part yourself. If you aren't interested in playing the games, be an active observer for the first few weeks your child is playing a new game.
- Establish a Media Use Contract with each child in your family. It is important that you have a conversation with each child to set rules and limits that are appropriate for him or her. In your conversation, be explicit about what types of video games you are comfortable with your child playing and what the consequences will be if the contract is broken. Once the contracts have been signed, post them in a prominent place in your home as a reminder.

Crisis Connection has professional presenters available to facilitate trainings on video game safety to children, parents and/or educators.

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