

## Gaming and teens: finding a positive balance

Many parents wonder 'Are my teens spending too much time gaming?' But screen time isn't the biggest issue. It's more important to ask 'What role does gaming play in my teens' lives?'

Most teens enjoy playing online games. It helps them connect with friends, build confidence and skills, and have fun. But sometimes problems can occur.

Luckily, there are things parents can do to help teens enjoy gaming in a balanced and positive way.

### **Bullying and other problems**

Some teens experience bullying and other hurtful behaviour while gaming, such as:

- Threats, insults or harassment
- Being left out of things on purpose
- Someone deliberately wrecking your game
- Someone destroying or stealing your currency or other items
- Having your private information hacked or shared.

Other risky behaviours can include:

- Chatting to strangers in multiplayer games
- Spending too much money on in-game purchases
- Playing age-inappropriate games with violence, nudity, horror, gambling or drugs
- Gaming until physical problems occur, like back pain or eye strain.

### **What can parents do?**

We encourage parents to play their teens' games with them and find out how the games work and why teens like them.

Parents can also take practical steps to help teens stay safe. These include:

- Install up-to-date security software
- Use parental controls – for tips, see [eSafety](#)
- Switch off in-game purchases or agree on a reasonable [limit](#)
- Help teens choose high privacy settings and strong passwords
- Check the ratings of games at [Australian Classification](#) and reviews at the [Australian Council on Children and the Media](#) to make sure they're OK for teens.

Parents can use the [eSafety Guide](#) to make sure their teens know how to:

- Choose private games with friends they know face-to-face
- Block or mute other gamers for bullying
- Report harmful behaviour to the games' moderators or administrators.

We encourage parents to set reasonable rules with teens, such as:

- Play in open, supervised parts of the house, like the lounge room
- Choose age-appropriate games
- Get up and move regularly – e.g. between game level.
- Finish important tasks like homework and chores before gaming
- Play with family members and face-to-face friends, not strangers
- Make plenty of time for other activities like family dinners and exercise.
- Don't click on links from strangers, which might contain viruses or malware
- Don't share personal info with strangers, such as your name, school or birthday.

Parents can also talk with their teens about the importance of being a good sport online as well as in person and telling a trusted adult if another gamer's behaviour makes them uncomfortable.

### **Know the warning signs**

Gaming is a good experience for most teens, but a minority experience serious problems while gaming.

Their parents might notice worrying behaviours such as:

- Problems at school, like dropping grades
- Withdrawal from family relationships or face-to-face friendships
- Loss of interest in hobbies they used to enjoy
- Unhealthy sleeping or eating habits
- Mood problems such as irritability, anger, distraction or depression
- Health concerns such as physical pain or vision problems

- Poor personal hygiene
- Big changes in how much money they have
- Seeming nervous, upset or secretive about their gaming
- Getting frustrated, angry or anxious when they're not gaming
- Needing to play for longer and longer in order to feel OK
- Feeling like they can't stop or reduce their gaming even if they want to
- Believing gaming is the only way to escape their problems or feel accepted.

These can also be signs of other problems – gaming may not be the main issue. Either way, it's important to seek help.

### Supporting our most vulnerable teens

Any teen might run into problems while gaming. However, some teens face a higher risk. These tend to be teens who are vulnerable already, struggling with 'real life' problems such as:

- Mental health concerns, like depression or anxiety.
- Social problems, like loneliness, extreme shyness or being bullied.
- Low self-control – e.g. being very impulsive, aggressive or restless.
- Poor self-esteem.
- Difficulty communicating with parents.
- Negative ways of thinking, such as extreme self-blame or obsessing over a problem while feeling helpless to solve it.
- A strong wish to escape from real-world problems.
- A strong wish to beat others and feel superior and powerful.
- Use of alcohol, cigarettes or drugs.
- Exposure to gambling in the family.
- Friendship groups where there is violence or antisocial behaviour.

If teens are showing these problems, parents might decide to get help whether there's a gaming concern or not.

Teens and parents can speak to a counsellor for free at:

- Dolly's Dream Support Line 0488 881 033
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- eheadspace 1800 650 890
- Parentline in your state or territory.

Learn more about gaming from headspace, Kids Helpline and eSafety.

