

## **Keeping Children Safe Online**

### **Focus: Online Gaming**

The second part of this series of briefing papers focuses on online gaming. Children and young people today are increasingly using the internet for a variety of different reasons; the rise of online gaming and the advances in modern technology have allowed for an online gaming community to be formed. More often than not, children and young people play games online with people they know - friends, siblings, classmates; however this is not always the case. Perpetrators are increasingly targeting children and young people via online gaming sites, pretending to be someone they are not. This can often lead to bullying, grooming and sexual exploitation. All professionals who work with children and young people must have an awareness of the variety of the different online platforms children use to communicate. In order to ensure they can offer basic safeguarding advice to children in this context, it is important for professionals to try to keep up to date with the new apps and gaming sites which are being used. Having a basic understanding can make a huge difference between a positive and a negative experience for a child/young person.

### **What is online gaming?**

Online gaming can be a fun way for children and young people to connect with others and they see the online gaming world as a virtual playground. Gaming consoles operate in much the same way as a computer; you can log on, put on a headset, turn on a webcam, and talk to and play with millions of gamers around the world. Many computer games are played online against other players over the internet, whether on a console, computer, mobile device or via social networking sites.

There are lots of different types of online games; some are simple such as chess or cards that you can play on your own. There are other much larger games where you can play against or with multiple players such as first person shootouts or adventure games where multiple players can partake at the same time. Increasingly, online games involve spending real money to purchase in-game property; with some games there are hidden financial risks in downloading and playing web and app-based games.

In some online games, you can talk to other players through a headset, often known as 'voice chat'. Some games allow for a 'voice mask' to be used which is an aid to disguise your voice and make you sound different. Online games also often involve a chat function; this may be text chat or voice chat. The same risks that apply to general chatrooms therefore apply in gaming situations - particularly with regard to personal information and inappropriate conversations/language.

## Gaming Sites

Below is a non-exhaustive list of some popular gaming sites children and young people use today.



**Call of Duty: Black Ops Zombies Age: 18+**

Game where players fight against zombies. Players can battle alone or in teams of up to 4.



**Minecraft: Pocket Edition Age: 7+**

A game that lets you build and create a virtual world using building blocks. Other activities include using the multiplayer function to explore the worlds created by other users and to combat, chat and play with them.



**Clash of Clans Age: 7+**

A combat game where players build their own armies (clans) and battle against other armies from around the world. You can join forces with other armies or battle against others on your own.



**FIFA Mobile Football Age: 3+**

A gaming app where you can build and manage your own football team.



**IMVU Age: 13+**

A virtual world where you create an avatar and connect with people from across the world.



**MovieStarPlanet Age: 8+**

An online game where you can create a famous movie star character to talk to others in the chat room, play games and watch videos.



**Pokémon GO Age: 3+**

Pokémon GO allows you to find Pokémon characters and catch them to add to your collection. The map is based on where you are standing (in real life).



**ROBLOX age: 8+**

A user-generated gaming platform where you can create your own games or play games that other users have made. There is also the option to chat to other players.



**Steam Age: 13+**

An entertainment platform which lets you play games and create your own in-game content. You can also chat to other members of the community, through groups, clans, or in-game chat features. Steam allows live streaming.

## Perpetrators

Children are often instantly drawn to the realistic images and fast-paced action online gaming has to offer. Perpetrators target children and young people in a variety of ways and online gaming is no exception. Perpetrators will target and groom children and young people by connecting with them, at times with the use of voice masks which hides the other person's gender and age. Most users play using an assumed identity and are generally unaware of who they are talking to.

Perpetrators often build on the shared online experience they have with the young person, by being their teammate in the game or their defender in the gaming chat room. This allows for perpetrators to develop a level of trust with the young person. Unique to the gaming world, often information is available by viewing the child's/young person's gaming history; this gives perpetrators a way of forming friendships with the child/young person. A perpetrator may entice a young person by giving them 'cheat sheets' or tips on how to advance to the next level.

## Safe Gaming

It is important to encourage children to play safely online. If you are a professional and are concerned about a child, your internal safeguarding procedures must be followed. However there are some tips to help children and young people (as well as parents) ensure that they are kept safe online.

No app or site is created to intentionally harm a child or a young person, many sites have a lower age limit for membership (13 years old is commonplace), but it's easy for children to get around it and get online at an earlier age. Some gaming sites glorify sexism and criminalisation which can create a false imagery of what the world is really like. Some allow you to post messages and questions anonymously which can lead to abuse. Others allow you to access and share inappropriate and/or sexual images and videos without properly verifying age limits. Although this is the reality, there are many ways to encourage proper, safe and responsible use of apps and sites.

### Tips for professionals and parents on safe gaming:

- Play online games only when you have effective and updated antivirus software;
- Play only with authorised versions of games which you have purchased from the correct sources and for which you have a licence;
- Verify the authenticity and security of downloaded files and new software by buying from reputable sources;
- Choose a user name that does not reveal any personal information. If you have a public profile, do not add any information which may reveal your personal details;
- Use strong passwords;
- Don't reveal any personal information to other players;
- Make sure the game software is kept up to date. Most multiplayer games automatically update themselves before connecting. Be wary about downloading any unauthorised program relating to the game;
- When disposing of the gaming device either by selling, scrapping, giving away or donating, ensure personal information has been deleted. The method of doing this varies from device to device. Do not forget to delete your account details;
- Set guidelines and ground rules for your children when playing online, play the games yourselves to test for appropriateness;
- Ask the children and young people what they are playing, take an interest in their gaming life; watching a young person play will keep the lines of communication open;
- Ensure the child or young person knows where they can report incidents which make them feel scared or uncomfortable. Each gaming site will have a reporting function, parents should familiarise themselves with this and show their child the steps to take.

For more information visit: <https://www.net-aware.org.uk> a guide created by the NSPCC and O2 which will help keep you up to date with today's digital world.



## Contact Us

To find out more about working with tri.x contact us on: Telephone: 024 7667 8053 or visit our website [www.trixonline.co.uk](http://www.trixonline.co.uk).

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