



Video Games: Establish Your Family's Own Rating System

By: Jeffrey Hutchinson, MD, FAAP

Video gaming is a multibillion-dollar industry. It brings in more money than movies and music combined. This isn't a huge surprise considering all the ways games can be played—on computers, game consoles, handheld devices, smart phones and online. Like it or not, video games are likely to be a part of your child's life at some point.



As a parent, you get to decide how much time your children or teens spend playing video games. You can also play a key role in monitoring the content of the games your kids play. Just keep in mind that helping them better engage with video games and other digital media can be a challenge for busy families. It's a continuous learning process, not a single success or single mistake.

Read on for some tips to help make video gaming a positive part of your child's life.

- **Get familiar with a video game's content before allowing your child or teen to buy it, download it or play it on- or offline.** As a parent or caregiver, you may not always realize what content video games have. Some include mature themes such as virtual violence ([/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx)) and mature sexual content. Studies of children exposed to violent media have found that they may become numb to violence. If they're heavily exposed (<https://www.common sense media.org/violence-in-the-media/does-exposure-to-violent-movies-or-video-games-make-kids-more-aggressive>) to violence, kids may also imitate it and show more aggressive behavior.
- **Check the Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB) ratings.** Thousands of video games are available at retailers on and offline. This makes it hard to pinpoint the content of each one. Instead, check the ESRB ratings (<http://www.esrb.org/>), the video game equivalent of movie ratings. These are a great starting point for choosing games that are appropriate for your family.

ESRB ratings are **featured clearly** (<https://www.esrb.org/ratings/where-to-find-ratings/>) on the game packaging of physical games. They're commonly found on digital games, virtual reality, and apps too. Ratings range from "Everyone" to "Adults Only." Sometimes marketing materials for boxed games will say "Rating Pending" if the game hasn't been rated yet.



Most major retailers have ESRB ratings on their games. Many also verify a person's age before letting them buy a game that's rated M or AO. Members of the ESRB's Retail Council (ERC) (<https://www.esrb.org/ratings/retail-council/>) regularly have mystery shoppers (<https://www.esrb.org/faqs/#do-video-game-retailers-support-and-enforce-the-esrb-rating-system>) check on how well the stores are complying too.

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- **If your child is old enough, have them give you a presentation** or "sales pitch" on why they want the game and why you should get it. This method builds valuable skills in children and redirects the energy of finding information back to the person most motivated.
- **Create a media plan for your family.** Time spent playing video games can crowd out time for essential activities such as exercise (</English/healthy-living/fitness/Pages/Encouraging-Your-Child-to-be-Physically-Active.aspx>), playing outside, reading or doing school work. Using screens close to bedtime can also disrupt sleep patterns. Our Family Media Use Plan (</English/media/Pages/default.aspx>) tool can help you start a discussion about creating healthy media habits, based on your family's needs and values. It can also calculate target lengths of time for your child's daily activities then shows how much time they have left over in the day for screens, including gaming.
- **Consider setting a kitchen timer** how long your kids can play video games. When your kids hear the timer go off, gaming time is over. Creating tokens for playtime like the tokens we used for arcades can also help set concrete limits. Another idea is checking-out controllers or power cords from you, the way they might check-out ping pong paddles at a rec center.
- **Check the parental control features** (<https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/parental-controls/>) on your family's game consoles, computers and smartphones. Some allow you restrict certain types of content by age, for example, and schedule time limits for play sessions.
- **Don't allow video games that are at odds with your family's values** (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Share-Your-Values.aspx>) inside your home. Explain to your kids that they can't play a new video game until you've had a chance to look it over or research it. Or, ask your kids to present their research, first! It's your right to have a personal rating system in your own home, even if other people choose different standards.
- **Communicate with the parents of your child's friends** about rules you set for your child. Good relationships go beyond video games. No one wants to be told how to raise their children, but we're all willing to listen to the thoughts of a friend. They may be willing to put away certain games when your child goes to their home.
- **Keep gaming in a common family area.** Just as you do when they're using the internet or watching TV, keep an eye on your kids while they're playing video games. Consider making any handheld gaming consoles family property rather than "owned" by each child.
- **Encourage your child or teen to choose games for multiple players and play with their friends.** Technology is a poor substitute for personal interaction. But playing with friends (</English/family-life/work-play/Pages/what-parents-can-do-to-support-friendships.aspx>) can help stop problems with harassment, social isolation and cyberbullying (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx>). Ask your child regularly which friends they would be embarrassed, uncomfortable or unhappy for you to see playing. If your child plays multiplayer games online, use a shared server or select safe multiplayer games with an "invitation only" privacy setting.
- **If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.** Playing a video game with your child or teen will expose you to the lingo of their world. Multiple player video games also allow your entire family to play together.

Remember

If you have concerns (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Unhealthy-Video-Gaming.aspx>) about your child's video gaming habits or if your child is having difficulty with mood or behavior, talk with your pediatrician. They may refer you to a trained and qualified mental health professional (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Whos-Who.aspx>).

More information

- [Unhealthy Video Gaming: What Parents Can Do to Prevent It \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Unhealthy-Video-Gaming.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Unhealthy-Video-Gaming.aspx)
- [Multiplayer Games Online: How to Help Keep Your Child Safe \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/multiplayer-games-online-how-to-help-keep-kids-safe.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/multiplayer-games-online-how-to-help-keep-kids-safe.aspx)

- [How Virtual Violence Impacts Children's Behavior: Steps for Parents \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx\)](#) [Back to Top](#)
- [Constantly Connected: How Media Use Can Affect Your Child \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Adverse-Effects-of-Television-Commercials.aspx\)](#)
- [ESRB Family Gaming Guide \(https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/family-gaming-guide/#\)](https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/family-gaming-guide/#)

About Dr. Hutchinson



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