



Multiplayer Games Online: How to Help Keep Kids Safe

By: Michael Rich, MD, MPH, FAAP

If your child hasn't asked to play a multiplayer game online yet, chances are good they will. Also known as massively multiplayer online games (MMOs or MMOGs), these games are extremely popular with people of all ages. A few examples of popular MMOs are World of Warcraft, Minecraft, Fortnite, FarmVille and World of Tanks. Most MMOs let people play with, talk to and message with others live on the game's network.



Risks & benefits of multiplayer online games

Playing MMOs can give your child experience with cooperation and teamwork. They can also be a good way to socialize and build relationships with friends. You can even enjoy playing them together as a family.

Along with potential benefits, though, it's important to also be aware of the risks MMOs can have. Here's how to embrace the positive aspects of MMOs while also keeping your child safe.

Talk with your child about online safety

It's important to discuss how to be safe online with your child before they play MMOs. These are lessons they'll use for the rest of their life.

Here's what to talk through together:

- Which friends and family members they're allowed to play with
- Why they should only play online with people they know and avoid strangers
- Why it's important not to share personal information online with anyone
- How to enable privacy settings to stop strangers from contacting them (for older kids and teens)
- How to delete or block people on their contact lists
- That it is OK to talk with you if something bad happens during the game.
- To let you know if a stranger contacts them or they feel bullied (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx) by other players
- Why they should never meet with someone they only "know" online in the real world

Choose games with safe environments or use parental controls

A great place to get information on games—as well as TV, books, movies, and apps—is Common Sense Media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>). The site has detailed game reviews for parents that look at the subjects and skills the game enhances. The reviews also rate features such as educational content, violence, language and sex.

If you're looking for MMOs for younger kids, try to choose games more limited communication or no communication with other players. Pokémon Sun, Pokémon Moon, Just Dance 2020, and Star Wars Battlefront II are some examples of games with "safer" environments.

Disabling chat & restricting content

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Keep in mind that although some MMOs don't offer live voice chatting, players can still use the game console's built-in chatting system. (Star Wars Battlefront II and Terraria are examples of this.) You can disable voice chat and manage communication in the parental controls (<https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/parental-controls/>) on the game console or device. You can also restrict content, manage screen time and set spending limits using parental or family controls.

Many MMOs offer parental controls too. For instance, popular games like Roblox and Fortnite let you restrict instant messaging and chatting. Roblox also allows parents to choose the types of games their children can play. Minecraft lets kids add, block, mute, and report other players, so make sure kids learn why and how to use these features when they start playing the game. Minecraft also has chat filters to make sure profanity and personal information doesn't go through.

Private access options

Another good option for letting kids play online with their friends is to choose games made for small groups or that have private access. Minecraft offers the option to buy Minecraft Realms, for example, which lets kids play with friends in their own private online world. Terraria allows kids to connect with a maximum of 7 other players (and has no communication options). Many online games let players set up their own private link that they can send to their friends.

Stay involved

Engaging with your child and keeping communication open is one of the most important ways you can help them stay safe.

- Ask your child to tell you about the games they like and why. Play it with them (ask them to teach you how—they enjoy that) or watch them play.
- Make it a point to check in often about who your child is gaming with and if they've had any strangers contact them.
- Keep the device or computer your child is using in a room with plenty of traffic, such as the living room, family room, or kitchen. This lets you see what they're doing without hovering over them.
- Check out any MMOs your child wants to play beforehand. Make yourself aware of the content and use parental controls to guide your child's play.

Set time limits on gaming

As with any type of screen, it's important to give your child limits on gaming. They need to have time for other activities such as homework, chores and being active (</English/healthy-living/fitness/StopWatch-Tool/Pages/default.aspx>). Our Family Media Plan (</English/media/Pages/default.aspx#wizard>) helps you create an individual plan for each child. You can also figure out how much time your child has for gaming each day with the included media time calculator.

More information

- Video Games: Establish Your Family's Own Rating System (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx>)
- How to Make a Family Media Use Plan (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx>)

About Dr. Rich



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