

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Video Games

axis

Game On

Few topics in today's media-saturated world can get a parent or teacher ranting like kids and video gaming. According to Pew Research Center, [72% of teens have played video games in the last year](#), and they only represent [28% of the video-game-playing population](#). The video gaming world often represents unknown territory to parents, though, and their attempts to enforce boundaries and limits on their gaming kids typically end in tension and conflict.

Video games developed [a bad reputation among child psychologists](#) in the 1980s and after, when home gaming first became affordable for the average family. Most of the advice given to parents was anecdotal; child behaviorists and teachers worried about what appeared to be a glazed-eye of gaming young people. As video game technology vastly improved toward the century's end, gaming options exploded from simple, pixelated viewing and simplistic goals to intricately animated universes, awe-inspiring digital effects, full musical scores, A-list voiceover talent, and vastly more complicated objectives. But the questions and worries they inspire remain.

What terms and slang should I know?

In order to talk with your gamers about what they love (or to know when to be concerned by something you overhear while they're playing), it helps to know a few terms. Here are the basics:

Battle Royale: A game where the player fights against around a hundred other players to be the last man standing in a *Hunger-Games*-style brawl (*Fortnite: Battle Royale* is currently the most popular of these. Check out our "[Parent's Guide to Fortnite](#)" for more info.).

Campaign: A series of events or challenges designed to tell a story; also known as "Story Mode."

Carry: When a single player on a team performs exceptionally well, compensating for the rest of the team's poor performance (also used in traditional sports).

Cheese: To win a game by using a strategy that's unorthodox, unexpected, or exploitive of a glitch in a game's design.

COD: Call of Duty—Extremely popular PvP and PvE Realistic FPS.

Combos: Combinations, a series of specific button input combinations, learned or memorized for the optimal effective playing experience.

CS:GO: Counterstrike: Global Offensive—Extremely popular PvP Realistic FPS.

DLC: DownLoadable Content—A extension or expansion on an existing game that can be purchased to build onto existing content.

FPS: First Person Shooter—A shooter game where the player only sees what the character could see.

Gank: To kill another player's character, particularly if the odds are super uneven (e.g. when your character is level 80 and theirs is level 2).

GG or GGWP: Good Game or Good Game, Well Played. Sent after a match to acknowledge the other players' skills and to display sportsmanship.

Guildmates or **Clanmates:** Other players in one's online gaming community.

IRL: In Real Life.

KD or **KDA:** Kills to Deaths Ratio—In MOBAs and team-oriented games, Assists (when you

helped a teammate kill an enemy) will also be measured, hence KDA.

LAN: Local Area Network.

MMO: Massively Multiplayer Online, games with thousands of players in an open world, all playing together.

MOBA: Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas, games where you choose a character and battle for objectives, typically 3–5 players on a team, two teams versus each other.

Mod: Modification—Specifically, a change to a game’s code to allow for different cosmetics or player-created game modes.

NPC: Non-Player Character—All characters in a game not controlled by the player or a human opponent. The behavior of NPCs is controlled by AI (artificial intelligence).

PvE: Player versus Environment—A game or mode focused on defeating NPCs or puzzles. PvE can apply to single player games as well.

PvP: Player versus Player—A game or mode focused on defeating other human players.

RPG: Role Playing Games, games where you build a character and adventure in a fantastic landscape, typically with the goal of ‘becoming’ that character, or living vicariously through that character.

Rage-quit: When you get so angry and frustrated that you suddenly quit or turn off the game (this usually elicits not-so-happy remarks from other players the next time you sign back in).

Troll: Someone acting in bad faith for their own amusement; can range from making off-color jokes to sending explicit or disturbing content in innocent-looking links.

Of course, there are *many* other terms, thanks to online playing and streaming platforms like Twitch. [This glossary](#) was helpful, but if there’s one you keep hearing and don’t understand, try searching for it online.

Why do teens love video games?

Games offer challenges and rewards that social media platforms don’t. Teens say they enjoy gaming as a way to “blow off steam” from the stress of the day—homework, friend dynamics, family weirdness, bullying, chores, picking colleges, choosing career paths, getting jobs, etc.

More importantly, teens love video games for their narrative element. Today’s games are fully immersive experiences that invite players into a dynamic and complex storyline in which they play a part in how the story unfolds. Unlike movies or books that allow you to experience a story from the outside, video games give “you the [control over a character](#) and his or her actions to an extent and allow you to experience the story as that character.” In this way, “[video games have become](#) a promising frontier for the creation of immersive, interactive storytelling. Cutting-edge visuals and audio can paint a scene for us and draw us into a new reality,” making our teens feel as if they aren’t just watching a story unfold, they are actively participating in it.

In addition, innovations in game design and platforms now allow teens to socialize while gaming—they invite friends to play, chat, text, make new friends, work together to form team strategies, and satiate their competitive drive (check out our “[Parent’s Guide to Discord](#)” and “[Parent’s Guide to Twitch.tv](#)” for more on the social side of games). And with the explosion of esports, some can even turn what was once considered a mind-numbing time waster with no real benefit into a career.

Is it still something that appeals mainly to males?

In 2015, [Pew Research found](#) that 89% of teen boys (ages 13–17) play video games. Any guesses for the percentage of teen girls that play? You may or may not be surprised that 59% of girls play. But that was in 2015. Fast forward three years, and the stats are even more astounding. In spring 2018, [Pew found](#) that **97% of teen boys and 83% of teen girls** say they play video games in some form or fashion. In addition, according to the Entertainment Software Association’s “[2018 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry](#),” 45% of all US gamers are female.

The increase in both male and female players could be due to any number of reasons (more mobile games, higher smartphone ownership among teens, higher gaming console ownership, more collaborative games, different types of games, the success of Fortnite, etc.), but it’s clear that this is no longer just a male pastime.

How does the video game ratings system work?

The ratings are created by the non-profit [Entertainment Software Rating Board](#), which was established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) and “also enforces industry-adopted advertising guidelines and helps ensure responsible web and mobile privacy practices under its Privacy Certified program.”

According to [their description](#), the ratings have 3 components:

- **Rating Categories**, which suggest age appropriateness;
- **Content Descriptors**, which indicate content that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern; and
- **Interactive Elements**, which highlight interactive or online features of a product, including users’ ability to interact with each other, the sharing of users’ location with other users, if purchases of digital goods or services are offered, and/or if unrestricted internet access is provided.

The ratings are as follows:

E: Everyone

E10+: Everyone 10 and above

T: Teen

M: Mature (17+)

A: Adults only (18+)

Check out how the ratings labels look [here](#), and read more about their process for determining ratings [here](#). It’s important to note that they only call the ratings *guidance* for parents, meaning that they’ve created a system for *everyone* that inherently can’t work perfectly for *individual* families and gamers. It’s important that we use the ratings as a baseline, then do some research on a game before deciding whether a specific child should play it or not.

Video games aren’t good for my teen, right?

Gamers are no longer basement-dwelling agoraphobes (if indeed they ever were); with today’s communication technology embedded in their games, gamers are [free to develop](#) similar

friendship dynamics with online friends as they do with in-person relationships. Moderate gaming [can improve](#) cognitive skills, problem-solving, decision-making, strategic thinking, attention level, manual dexterity, computer literacy, and can help kids in reading, math, and science. It increases a teen's interest in STEM topics and improves their ability to process visual information quickly and correctly. Many games even take place in historically accurate times and places, piquing the interest of teens who ordinarily would roll their eyes at the sight of a history text.

This isn't to say they're free of problematic content, however.

— What gives parents the most trouble with their kids and video games?

Limits. Parents have a hard time enforcing boundaries on video game play with their kids. For one thing, teens can play practically anywhere: on home-based consoles, personal computers, smartphones, tablets, handheld consoles, social media, school computers, at a friend's home, at stores that sell games. . . .The Internet has no shortage of free games available to users— games of all types with no regulation of content or age limitations for players. It's impossible to have complete control over their length of gaming time and the types of games they access. Additionally, their friends' parents may not adhere to the content or time limits you set for your kids, and they could also widely differ on morality and judging appropriate gaming content for kids.

Violence. Perhaps the best-known debate about video games is the potential harms of violence portrayed in-game. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 85% of video games (even ones rated "E for Everyone," see above for rating explanation) [contain some ability of a player to intentionally harm another player](#).

In 2011, the US Supreme Court rejected [a ban on the sale of violent video games to minors](#) in California. In the decision rejecting the case, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote that the link between real-world violence and video games "has been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason: They do not prove that violent video games cause minors to act aggressively."

However, some kids are naturally predisposed and therefore more susceptible to the effects of visual violence (perhaps because of a greater sensitivity, a less agreeable personality, a tendency to be less conscientious than their peers, or even a genetic emotional disorder). Repeated exposure to that kind of content [can eventually show up in behavior](#); wise caution and awareness of your child's temperament is critical. And, regardless of whether your child becomes violent because of video games, he or she can become anesthetized to violence and calloused toward real world violence. Over exposure may lead to a lack of empathy and compassion to real victims of violence.

Behavior. Though the connection between video-game violence and real-world violence is tenuous, there are [reasons to believe](#) that video games can encourage violence and anger even without showing it on the screen. Video games are designed to light up our brain's reward centers by offering continuous challenges, giving a little hit of dopamine with every success. If we aren't careful, this can result in impulsiveness, impatience, and irritability when gaming is interrupted. And though many games can have [positive messages](#) or create space for otherwise shy teens to connect with their peers, there is also a danger of [anti-social messaging](#) or

encouraging gamers to [react to obstacles as things to be destroyed](#).

Costs. Money spent on video game titles, consoles, accessories, and in-game purchases of added content can add up fast. Newly released titles can run upwards of \$60 apiece, not to mention the hundreds of dollars you could spend on updated tech...and wasn't it only a few years ago we bought the previous model?

Video games get better, brighter, and more complex with every passing month, and gamers often feel motivated to keep up with the latest trends—not unlike the desire to grab the newest model of an iPhone or trade in an old car for a new one. It's virtually impossible to keep up with every appealing option that game companies can offer.

— **What can I do to keep my teen's gaming healthy (without arguing about it)?**

You don't have to fight with your teen to put limits on their gaming. Before you come at them with a list of “no way”s, “absolutely not”s, and “not on your life”s, here are a few tips:

Take an interest. Most parents don't know a lot about video games, but it's easier today to learn about them than ever before. Show your teen that you care about their interests and teach them self-regulation at the same time by getting involved, watching, learning, and growing alongside them.

You can search YouTube for any game title and watch promotional trailers and sample gameplay for every game on every console and platform. Watch your teen interact with others during multiplayer games: Is your teen a leader? A follower? The peacemaker? A team-builder? A strategist? Determining these aspects of their personality might help in discovering other activities at which they might excel. Ask them to explain their favorite game to you while you watch. Ask questions before casting judgments: *What do you like best about this game? How do you relate to this character? Is the story realistic or more like fantasy? Who in your group of friends is the best player at this game and why? How does playing this game make you feel?*

Show your teen how games are made. Explore together the technical/creative aspects of game production, methodology, storyboarding, soundtrack and sound, marketing, voice-over talent—the whole deal. You can even encourage them to create their own game; applications and software for game development are affordable and easy to learn. Your child's hobby could turn into a career path.

Model healthy online habits. Teens are hypersensitive to hypocrisy; we cannot set a standard for them that we won't follow ourselves. Setting up consistent rules for ourselves and our families will show our teens that we mean what we say.

Encourage your whole family to prioritize face-to-face communication where possible. Set up times and spaces where phones, games, and computers don't enter, and protect them. We can't convince our kids that there's value in real-life relationships if we don't live it out ourselves.

Teach Internet safety. Remind your kids to never reveal personal information or any details about themselves or your family to anyone online, not even friends they know, since it is easy for others to listen in. They should never arrange to meet someone in-person who they first met online without a trusted adult present.

Teens and parents also need to beware of chat in general; even in seemingly innocent games, trolls abound.

Allow your teen to participate in setting limits. Ask them: *What limits do your friends have on their gaming time? How long do you think is appropriate to play at one sitting? What are some good things about playing video games? What kinds of game content could be a problem and why? How can you tell when you've played too much? How will you avoid letting the game's content seep into your life and attitude?* Of course, you will make the final decisions, but by discussing it with your teen and hearing their preferences and concerns, you send them a message of respect and give them the opportunity to show some maturity (and make you proud).

Explore other places, people, topics related to the games they enjoy. If your teen enjoys a game with a historical or cultural context (say, a setting in World War II or characters from Greek mythology), go to a museum exhibit displaying WWII-era relics or find a great book about Mount Olympus. If your kid enjoys sports-related games, take them to a real one (played by amateurs or pros, doesn't matter) or buy some second-hand gear and learn to play it in your yard. Take them to a symphony concert of the video game's soundtrack (most professional orchestras include a video game-oriented concert in their pops repertoire every few years.) Talk about how the real thing compares to the way the game portrays it. One dad we know agreed to buy his kids a Wii and play it with them as long as they also played the real games. So, they'd play Wii bowling one night, and then follow that with a trip to the bowling alley. Eventually, his kids decided the real thing was far better than the video-game version, and their family carved out special times to play games together.

Learn to play the game with your teen. Yes, really. Learn to play your teen's favorite games. Ask them to teach you how to use those crazy controllers, and then let them humiliate you at first. Then, practice at it. Ask for tips and advice. Get better at it. Tell them stories about lining up quarters in the arcade playing Galaga and Centipede, let them laugh at the cobwebs on your childhood, and then watch what happens when you finally do well at your kid's favorite video game. You'll love it. So will they.

Create a no-go list. No one is suggesting you put away your morals in favor of your children's pleasures. Determine what your non-negotiables are and communicate them clearly: "No playing video games in your bedroom." "No mature-rated video games in our home." "Finish homework and chores before playing any games." "If you get so upset with the game that you throw the controller or lose your temper, you must stop playing immediately." "When I say 'get off the game,' do it without griping."

When should I start worrying?

As mentioned earlier, video games can offer a stress-reliever for the daily weirdness of growing up, but they can't substitute for real coping skills. Ensure that your son or daughter is not gaming instead of properly dealing with what's bothering them: bullying, difficulty making friends or relating to teachers, discipline problems at school, or even emerging mood disorders like anxiety or depression.

Stronger intervention or limits may be also in order if your teen:

- Seems preoccupied with video gaming—they become distracted or irritable when they aren't playing, or talk exclusively about gaming.
- Plays in secret, lies about their gaming time, hides how much they play, or makes excuses to play longer.

- Shows an increase in aggressive behavior or quotes offensive lines learned from a game or a fellow gamer.
- Displays a lack of control, i.e., intends to play for 20 minutes but actually plays for hours. (Remember, video games tacitly encourage this behavior.)
- Neglects responsibilities or relationships, including friendships, family gatherings, homework, personal hygiene, or other important parts of their lives.
- Spends a majority of their money on video gaming or continually adds upgrades and downloadable content to the games they own.
- Seems unconcerned or defensive about people in their life feeling ignored, left out, or forgotten.

How should I handle unhealthy gaming?

It's easy to fall into unhealthy habits with games—they're designed to be addictive. How can we help our kids stay of sound mind rather than letting their hobbies consume them?

The first step is understanding and empathy. It's [startlingly easy](#) to develop a dependence on gaming. Video games offer a simpler representation of our real lives, one in which every problem has a solution that can be reached in a handful of hours. We crave the dopamine release associated with accomplishments, and video games offer continuous hits. And, as with many addictive behaviors, video game addiction can often arise as a symptom of deeper problems—loneliness, dissatisfaction, purposelessness, and others.

Because addiction often serves as a salve [to the feeling of disconnection](#), it's important not to make your teen feel attacked or devalued when you broach the topic of their habit. Ease into it. Express an interest in their favorite games. Show them that you care about them and, by extension, the things they care about. With that foundation, you can start having conversations about what the habit is doing to them, and how they can regain control without abandoning something they feel is a part of their identity.

Encourage your teens to pursue games in a healthy way that honors themselves and God. They don't have to cut themselves off entirely; it's possible to spend a reasonable amount of time on their hobby without losing the ability to engage with the people around them.

Any last words?

Though the Bible is silent on video gaming, it is anything but silent on conviction of the Holy Spirit on right and wrong ([John 16:7–9](#)) and on doing whatever is necessary to keep God the ultimate priority in the believer's life ([Philippians 3:7–10](#)). God also wants every Christian to know unequivocally that, even in our failures ([Psalm 143:10](#)), we are valued, gifted, forgiven by His grace, and therefore fully *good enough* ([Psalm 139:13–14](#); [Ephesians 2:10](#); [Romans 15:7](#); [Romans 8:1](#)).

Video games offer an immersive form of entertainment—a way to amuse ourselves or to detach. And whatever value they can offer, they cannot replace a relationship with your teen or a growing walk with Christ. Enjoy them responsibly.

Additional Resources

[Entertainment Software Rating Board \(ESRB\)](#)—Provides detailed information and ratings on the content of video games.

[The Top-Selling Video Games of 2017](#)—An assessment by Forbes magazine to help parents recognize and discuss popular game titles with their kids.

[Common Sense Media](#)

[Pew Research](#)—The most current (trustworthy) statistics on games, gaming, and gamers.

We're creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.