

A guide for parents of young gamers



universität
wien



Funded by
the European Union

University of Vienna
GAMEHEARTS
Media Governance & Industries Research Lab
June 2026

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.22233138

Authors:

Katharine Sarikakis, Ourania Maria Ventista,
Lisa Baumgartner, Grigorios Arkoumanis,
Oleksandra Gudkova, and Ayça Becerir

Designed by: Lisa Baumgartner

Cover image by "and machines" on Unsplash

This guide was designed as a resource to support the parents and carers of young children, who may already be gamers or may want to become one! This guide is designed as part of the **GAMEHEARTS** project, which explores the ways in which the European videogame industry ecosystem (EVGIE) has a wider social function as member of the creative and cultural industries. This considers the importance of the EVGIE in contributing to economic growth, job creation, physical and mental wellbeing, and social and cultural cohesion, by particularly focusing on, how a stronger and closer working relationship between more the traditional and emergent cultural sectors, can work better to create more inclusive, and socially responsible, cultural experiences. Working across seven work packages the universities of Vienna (coordinator) (Austria), Salford (UK), Tampere (Finland), Breda University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands), and Wroclaw University of Economics and Business (Poland) work in partnership with Imperial War Museum (UK), City Football Group (UK), Ubisoft (France), and other major video game partners and associations (including the Video Games Europe (VGE) & European Video Games Developer Federation (EGDF) to explore current and future trends in the EVGIE.

Project website: <https://gamehearts.eu/>

Contents

Introduction	4
Benefits	6
Risks	8
What is the real effect?	9
What can parents do? SAFETY FIRST	10
Love for games means Protect	14
Essential safety tips	15
CASE 1	16
CASE 2	17
CASE 3	22
Policy recommendations	23
Self-test questions	25
Further reading and resources	26
References	27

Introduction

As a research team, we focus on video games. This resource is designed for parents whose children play videogames. We understand that some of these parents may be navigating the world of video games as gamers themselves, whilst others may be observers of the process.

Are you a parent of a young child who is playing videogames? Your child may have just started or is considering playing videogames. You may have already tried to prevent or stop your child from playing. Is it possible? Should you do it? Although you may feel like you navigate this path on your own, video games are a very popular form of entertainment for children! This is the reason why it is important for parents to know how to support their children in this experience.

Let's look at some numbers!

The popularity of videogames does not show any signs of decline. It is every parent's decision whether they will allow their children to play videogames or from which age or for how long. As a parent, you will handle the situation considering your child's schedule and needs and your family's values. The aim of this guide is to offer some support if your child is already a gamer or wants to become one. It may be worth considering some of the potential benefits and risks. This guide discusses both risks and benefits of videogames, whilst prioritising safety. Overall, it promotes a critical approach to videogames and suggests ways you can support your child.

At the end of this guide, there are two examples referring to the content of the videogames and the videogame industry to demonstrate the ways in which a critical approach can be adopted.

This guide explores these aspects in more detail. It aims to support parents whose children play video games to ensure their safety as a top priority and explore a couple of discussion topics in relation to gaming, which may come up with your children.

How many young people play video games?

69%

of children in Europe between the ages of **6-10 years** old play videogames*

85%

of children in Europe between the ages of **11-14 years** old play videogames*

83%

of children in Europe between the ages of **15-24 years** old play videogames*

*Source: Video Games Europe, 2025

Video games today come in many forms, from simple mobile apps to complex online worlds that connect millions of players. They can be a source of entertainment, creativity, and social interaction. At the same time, the variety and accessibility of games mean that children can encounter a wide range of content, communities, and play styles. Understanding how games work, what makes them appealing, and what children may gain – or struggle with – while playing, can help parents make informed decisions and support healthy gaming habits.

Before proceeding, stop and reflect on these questions:

- 1.Does your child play games?
- 2.Does your child play games outside of the house (e.g. in a friend's house)?
- 3.Does your child play games every day?
- 4.How many hours does your child play per week?
- 5.Do you play games yourself? Do you know enough about gaming?

- 6.Do you have a parental control system for video games?
- 7.Do you check that the games your child plays are appropriate for their age?
- 8.Do you know whether your child is safe as they play video games?

Benefits

Learning

Children can learn via videogames and it may be worth exploring games as potential tools that can support your children in their learning. Research tells us that video games can develop and promote children's cognitive skills, such as spatial navigation (Uttal et al., 2013) and memory; can also help in mathematics, strategic reasoning, problem-solving, and algebraic thinking (Tokac et al., 2019). So, overall videogames can improve students' knowledge and skills (Barz et al., 2023).

Well-being

Videogames can contribute to well-being: they can be used as a mechanism of escaping real-world stressful situations and as a safe virtual environment where children can relax and handle their everyday hardships (Granic et al., 2014). Videogames, in many cases, may boost children's confidence and self-esteem through gamesets that award players after completing a mission or for solving a riddle (Ryan et al., 2006). Overall videogames can offer relaxing time to children and give them a way to avoid everyday stressful situations.

Inclusive type of entertainment

Video games represent an inclusive type of entertainment that promotes accessibility for diverse players by offering features like subtitles or colourblind modes that reduce barriers between the game and its users (Kulik, 2025).

Creativity

Videogames can also support the development of creativity and imagination (Ott & Pozzi, 2011). For example, sandbox videogames can be very useful and productive as they encourage players to think, take actions and build their own virtual world. A study used a classical sandbox videogame and found a positive impact on children's writing skills (Ellison & Drew, 2019).

Collaboration skills and belonging to a community

Videogames can help children develop collaboration skills as well as their sense of belonging to a global multicultural community. By playing cooperative videogames, children can develop their skills of working together and of solving problems together as a member of a team (Greitemeyer, 2013). Moreover, in many cases, online communities are multicultural environments, where players learn to respect each other, deal with disagreements with dialogue. In such environments even marginalised and isolated children have a voice and can communicate with others.

Learning how to fail

In many cases video games also involve the aspect of losing. This may show to children that sometimes we fail. However, with persistence and a learning and problem-solving focus, it is possible to overcome failure and achieve something. For example, in a study examining the correlation between gaming and the development of resilience the results saw positive impact (Israel-Fishelson & Hershkovitz, 2020).

Risks

Cyberbullying

In online video games, cyberbullying is a common risk for children, occurring through voice or text chat with threats, insults, teasing, or exclusion (Moral-García et al., 2025). Players may repeatedly target a child to ruin their experience or embarrass them in front of others, which can seriously affect confidence and emotions. Children need to feel safe speaking with a trusted adult about anything that makes them uncomfortable or scared. You can help by discussing online behavior regularly and by teaching children how to mute, block, or report harmful players. Most importantly, children must know that being bullied is never their fault.

Hate speech

Online multiplayer games can spread misinformation and hate speech through voice or text chat, where some players promote hateful messages, stereotypes, or false claims about people and events (Wells et al., 2025). Such content is especially harmful to children, who are still forming their values. Hate speech, such as racist, sexist, or homophobic narratives and misinformation may normalise harmful beliefs or make young players feel targeted or unsafe. Exposure to such messages can confuse young players, normalise harmful beliefs, or even make them feel unsafe or targeted.

Inappropriate content

Online games often contain violent scenes, strong language, sexualised characters, or references to drugs, content that may not be age-appropriate for children. Repeated exposure can desensitize kids, affect their emotions, or encourage risky behaviour (Carnagey et al., 2007). Over time, this may reduce empathy and blur their understanding of real-life consequences.

In-game purchases and Loot Boxes

In-game purchases include buying something in the game, while microtransactions are small purchases within games for items or advantages. These can involve downloadable content (DLC), extra levels, virtual currency, weapons, armor, characters, or cosmetic items, paid for with real or virtual currency (Schwiddessen & Karius, 2018). Among microtransactions, loot boxes, purchasable items with randomized contents, have drawn attention for their gambling-like characteristics (Zendle et al., 2020). Loot boxes, battle passes, and cosmetic microtransactions often involve risk, uncertainty, and chance, mimicking gambling behaviours (Griffiths, 2018; Zendle et al., 2020; Brooks & Clark, 2019). Research links loot box engagement with problem gambling, financial difficulties, and psychological harms such as depression and substance abuse (Von Meduna et al., 2020; Zendle & Cairns, 2018).

Monetisation mechanisms are designed to sustain engagement and convert gameplay into recurring spending, often obscuring real-world costs. They frequently use random-reward systems that mimic gambling, exploiting emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities through monetary risk, intermittent reinforcement, and near-miss effects. Such practices, termed monetary dark patterns, steer players toward spending by leveraging psychological biases without informed consent (Niknejad et al., 2024; Veiga et al., 2025).

What is the real effect?

Not all research findings support the positive effect of videogames in children's life and development. Some link videogames to children aggression (Ferguson, 2015), whilst others found that the frequent use of electronic games in young children may be linked to weaker cognitive skills, like visuospatial memory (Gashaj et al., 2021).

In addition, if learning is the final aim, it should be recognised that whilst some digital games can be educational, others may include limited educational features. Some evidence also suggests that non-digital games may have bigger effects on learning than digital ones (Talan et al., 2020).

To conclude, videogames may have pros and cons. This guide does not advocate for or against videogames, but it acknowledges that many children currently play video games and it is a popular type of entertainment. Parents can be prepared to support their children in navigating.

What can parents do? SAFETY FIRST!

Children's safety during videogames should be the top priority and should be ensured. What can a parent do to protect their child as they play videogames?

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CHILD

Inform your child about the risks of video games. There are various risks online, such as cyberbullying and online scams. You could start by letting your child know about these risks and suggest steps they could take in each case. Many games, especially online, have communicative features such as voice communication, or social interaction. Although this can be positive, helping kids develop communicational skills, offers a suitable place for cyberbullying and hate speech. In addition, some people may pretend to be kids on these platforms, whilst they are not.

According to UNICEF (n.d.), cyberbullying may involve hurtful or threatening messages, the spread of fake news and lies, exclusion of specific players from the communication chat and mocking of a player's performance or identity. You should empower your child to not tolerate such behaviour online and to not be afraid to leave the spaces where they are made to feel uncomfortable.

Encourage your child to have open and regular communication about their feelings with you while they are gaming. Help them learn how to avoid such misbehaviour by others, not engage in this themselves, and how to report and block people that make them feel uncomfortable. You can also let your child know about the threats of monetisation and loot boxes. Discuss with your child about how they should act in cases like this. Freemium (free-to-play) games often contain more dark patterns. Children should understand that even games that appear to be without charge, they will try to gain money in different ways.

Keep communication with your child open. Safety is an ongoing process. It is good to let your child know about potential risks, but it is also important to keep the communication open. Maintain interest in the games your child plays and ask them questions to find out more about their experience or any concerns they might have. This not only helps you stay informed, but also builds trust, making it easier for them to come to you if they encounter any problems.

Encouraging open dialogue creates a safe environment where your child feels supported and understood as they navigate online spaces. It is important for children to know that they can always talk to you about their experience if something does not feel right or they have a negative experience online (e.g. cyberbullying) and be treated without judgement.

You could talk with your children about what they see and hear online. By maintaining open communication, parents can help children navigate online spaces more safely and responsibly.

Check the age appropriateness of the games your child plays. It is very important to have information about the video games your child plays as it is easier to understand whether a game is appropriate and beneficial for your child. You can check the video games PEGI (Pan European Game Information) classification, which is a system for rating video games based on age suitability and content. The ratings are designed to help parents and caregivers make informed decisions about the games their children play.

Play with your child! Try to actively engage by occasionally playing the games together with your child. It gives you firsthand experience of the game's content and any potential risks or inappropriate elements that your child might encounter. By playing together, you not only gain insight into what your child is exposed to, but also create opportunities for meaningful interaction. Research shows that such shared gaming experiences can strengthen family bonds (Wang, Taylor & Sun, 2018).

Learn about your children's games. You can read about this using resources like this guide. It is also good to remember that other parents share the same concerns with you, so it may be helpful to also talk to them and exchange knowledge and resources.

Technology may sometimes help! Parent control software options can be used to check children's activity online, control screen-time, and prevent malicious sites from being automatically open (pop-ups). It is important to not just set controls, but explain to your child the reasons why you take action about specific aspects. Children may try to bypass these restrictions if they do not understand why you are choosing to monitor their gaming experience.

In the further reading section, you'll find sources explaining PEGI labels to help you better understand the games your child plays.



Further safety tips, including parental control and age ratings on page 15.

HELP BUILD HEALTHY HABITS

Promote habits that are good for your child. Establish boundaries together with your child to facilitate healthy gaming habits. For example, track and help them track their screen time and ensure they mostly play during the weekend. Ensure that they also spend enough time playing outdoors and with their friends.

It is very important to be sure that video games and screen time do not replace physical social interaction and outdoor playing. For example, you could encourage them to meet their friends instead of playing online games together remotely.

It should be noted though that it is not just a matter of tracking screen time, but also of exploring the ways in which children spend time on screen (Steinkuehler, 2016). It is possible that children spend less time in games, but they still fall into traps (e.g. revealing their personal information). So the quality of the time they spend online also matters!

Consider keeping devices and screens in common areas of the house, such as the living room, where you can easily observe your child while they play. This setup allows you to monitor their activity and ensures they are in a safe environment.

CONSIDER PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION

Check games information about storage and handling of personal data.

Many games collect personal information about their players. This can range from full names, usernames and chat logs to location data and behavioural patterns or even sensitive information such as bank account details. Before playing any games, the players are asked to agree to the Terms and Conditions (T&C), which are rules for using the game. You must carefully review each game's privacy policies to be able to understand what kind of data is collected and for what purpose, where this information is stored and whether this data is shared with third parties, including analytics companies and advertisers.

Make sure your child always uses a pseudonym instead of their real name

when playing online games or using social platforms. They should never share personal information such as their full name, age, address, school, or phone number during gameplay or in chats. Explain that sharing such details can put them at risk, as strangers online might misuse this information. Teach your child the importance of keeping their identity private and remind them to never respond to requests for personal data in digital spaces.

Find out who the other players of the videogame are. Some games involve other players since they have a collaborative element. Videogames can be great for community building and a sense of belonging. Children can learn how to collaborate and develop their collaborative skills. However, it is important to know who your child is playing with. Are there other kids from the same school or from families you know? Are there strangers? Where do they chat while playing? Advise your children to never take the chat outside the gaming platform. It is important for the child to understand that some strangers may pretend to be someone else. It does not necessarily mean that if someone claims to be a child, they are.

YOU ARE NOT POWERLESS.

Although as a parent you might feel there is very little you can do, especially if your children are teenagers, please remember that children always need their parents. You may feel that all the above advice may not work and your child may not listen to you. For example, how can a parent influence children's choices of videogames? Encouraging news comes from research that suggests parents actually do have an impact. A study conducted by DeCamp (2019) reveals that there is a clear and meaningful connection between how children perceive their parents' opinions about violent video games and the amount of time they spend playing such games. This indicates that parents can act as effective gatekeepers of their children's media consumption, not necessarily through strict rules or discipline, but rather through a close and trusting relationship.

While parental influence is important, it is not the only factor shaping children's gaming habits, individual personality, and social environment also contribute. Nonetheless, this research provides evidence that parents' views and attitudes do matter and can shape children's choices. So, even if it sometimes feels like your guidance goes unheard, your involvement and expressed opinions are significant and can help your child make better decisions about the games they play.

Moreover, even though this effect is stronger for younger children, this effect remains even in older youth.

Love for games means Protect

This guide recommends overall a critical approach when engaging with videogames. This means that as parents, you do not have to be only positive or only negative as you discuss this topic with your child. You can present the current situation and help your child use critical thinking when approaching these topics too.

- **Discuss with your child openly about their interests.**
- **Help your child think about these issues from more angles.**
- **Be honest about your concerns.**

Two examples are presented below to demonstrate a critical approach in two key issues of the videogames. As part of our research project we focused on diversity in videogames and the videogames industry as an industry, which supports economic growth and creation of jobs. How can you approach these two important topics critically with your children? Videogames may seem exciting but you should encourage your child to think about these topics in more depth!

It should be noted that some general guidelines are offered but you should feel free to make adjustments based on the child's age, personality, interests and your family values. Some issues can be discussed more in depth if the child is older or explained in simple terms if the child is very young.

Essential Safety Tips

Understanding PEGI Ratings

Many parents only look at the age number (e.g. PEGI 7, PEGI 12, etc.). However, the content icons are often even more important. These symbols explain why a game received its rating and what type of content is to be expected from the game.



Source: Video Games Europe, 2025; PEGI.

Disable In-App Purchases

Many games encourage children to spend money on skins, loot boxes, upgrades, and limited time offers. To prevent accidental purchases, require passwords for purchases, turn off one-click buying, and remove saved credit card information in the settings.

Use Built-In Parental Controls

Parental control systems can help parents set screen time limits, restrict age-inappropriate games, monitor purchases, control online communication, and schedule gaming hours.

Set Up Family Accounts

Communication alone is not enough. Use available parental controls to manage purchases, downloads, screen time, and age-appropriate content. Tools such as Apple Family Sharing, Google Family Link, Xbox Family Settings, PlayStation Family Management, and Nintendo Parental Controls can help create safer gaming environments. Because technology changes frequently, check the latest instructions for your device or game. Additional guidance is available on the Video Games Europe parental controls guide (link in further reading section).

CASE 1: CHARACTERS IN VIDEOGAMES

One of the key conversations you could start with your child (or may even come up) is characters in video games. Notice what type of characters your child chooses to play.

1. Do they look like your child? Does your child try to create their own self in the virtual world?
2. Does their favourite it look like your child but with some characteristics enhanced?
3. Is it completely different? Is it a character that is not related to their real self like an animal or an elf?

Discuss with your child about the characters and ask them about the reasons why they chose this character. It is interesting to also note the other characters in the games that your child plays. Some characters are playable and some characters exist in the background, they are not playable.

1. Does the game include female characters? How are female and male characters presented?
2. Are there diverse characters in the game your child plays? If there are diverse characters, is it possible that these are stereotyped?
3. Does the game include children characters? How are these presented?

Discussion points

The underrepresentation of specific characters is unfortunately still true for the gaming industry. For example, there are not many children characters in videogames. Reay (2021) analysed characters of 506 successful video games from 2009 – 2019 and found that only 19% of videogames have children as characters, whilst only half of them are playable and most of them are white boys aged 6 – 11 years old.

It is not enough for some characters to simply appear in the games. The way these characters are represented also matters. It is typical for many games to have a stereotypical representation of some social groups. For example, female characters in videogames are usually presented as passive and their role is to be rescued or simply be assistants to central male characters (Melzer, 2018). They usually do not have particular skills themselves. This is an important point to consider: it is not enough to simply include more female characters; it also matters how they are portrayed. For instance, more powerful female characters could empower young girls who play these games, since a lot of times children identify with the role of the character they play.

Why does this topic matter?

In a discussion, you could ask your child why they think this topic matters and you can share your own reflections. Some points you could also mention to facilitate the discussion.

- 1.It can help people feel included and appreciated, if they can find characters in the story they can relate to.
- 2.It can facilitate character identification and this may also be linked to the enjoyment of the game.
- 3.It can support an inclusive environment for everyone who plays and develops collaborative skills.
- 4.Diversity as simple representation is not enough. Non-stereotypical representation is also important.

CASE 2: VIDEOGAMES INDUSTRY

Has your child ever said that they like video games so much that they would like to become professional gamers? What if your child is so passionate about video games and they would like to pursue a career in the game industry? It is very likely that since your child loves videogames, they may start saying that they would like to do a job like this when they grow up.

It is possible that you have not thought about it, or that you think this is a good career path or not. In any case, listen to your child and try to approach this issue with dialogue. You could help your child find out more about this. You could explain that every situation has pros and cons, so help them to also see that this fascinating world may also present some difficulties. You can support your child to think about issues they may face.

Children may identify with gamers or streamers they see online, but there are many different careers within the games industry. If they are genuinely interested, you can help them learn about the wide range of jobs available.

Some potential roles

Game Designer	The game designer creates the rules of the game, the levels of the game, the progression of the game.
Game Artist	This person creates the visual elements of the games, such as designing the environment. You could suggest this to your child if they like drawing.
Game Programmer	Writes the code. Programming is an important skill for this role.
Sound Designer	This person is responsible for the audio part of the game, such as sound effects.
Voice Actor	A child who likes acting could consider this career. It is an actor for the game, like the actors that there are in animations. They give their voice to the characters.
Animator	This person is responsible for the movements in the games, designing the big movements like walking or running of characters and smaller movements like the facial expressions. Objects also move thanks to them!
Game Tester	This person tests the games. They actually play the game to see whether the game is having a glitch or an error at some point or whether it is interesting and appealing for the players. This is an important step before release.
Producer	This person is responsible for the budget of the game and organises the process with the timelines. The producer may use the company's money or may identify funding sources.
Writer	This person writes the story of the game. If your child has imagination and likes writing, they may consider this role.

Community
Manager

The community should be engaged with the video game. This person is responsible for engaging current and future games with the video game by organising events online, in-person, forum discussion and social media.

UX
Designer

This designer is focused on the user's experience. They try to make the games enjoyable, user-friendly and accessible to all. For example, they may create a menu in the game and test the navigation.

Game
Developer

A game developer is someone who creates video games by designing, programming, and building their interactive features, visuals, and mechanics.

Technical
support
Assistant

This person collaborates with the customers. They may respond to them via emails or chat. They ensure that the experience of the customer is good. This is a typical role in different organisations. If your child is passionate about gaming, they could consider customer support in this technical environment of the video game industry.

Specialist in
Marketing

As in other organisations, marketing is also important for games. The marketing person, who will also collaborate with the community teams and the community manager, will advertise the game so people will get to know it. The aim is for the game to be popular so marketing matters. Your child may study marketing and they may opt to work in the industry as a route if they are passionate about video games.

Streamer

A video game streamer is someone who plays video games while broadcasting the gameplay live online, usually with commentary and audience interaction, typically on Twitch, Youtube, or TikTok.

Thus, there are many roles that someone could pursue in this industry. You could present your child these roles. You could suggest to your child that they could learn new skills (e.g. programming) in order to join this fascinating world. Learning about these roles would help the child realise how many people are involved in the process of preparing and producing their favourite game. The child may also identify some roles that they like and be motivated to learn new skills.

However, even though this industry may seem magical for your child, just like any other industry it also has some issues. It can be helpful to share some of these issues with your child, especially if they say they want to work in games one day. Being aware of challenges can help them make better decisions and think realistically about what a career in this field might look like.

Some of the issues identified in our research based on talking with people who work in the gaming industry include:

Lack of diversity and representation

Women and people from minority groups are still underrepresented in many game studios, especially in leadership roles. This can also influence the types of characters and stories that appear in games.

Harassment and discrimination

Some workers, especially women, LGBTQ+ people, and minorities, report facing harassment or exclusion in both workplaces and online spaces linked to games.

Limited opportunities to enter the industry

It can be difficult for young people to get their first job in gaming. Many roles require very specific skills, portfolios, or unpaid experience, which not everyone can afford or access.

Gaming is often not seen as a real career option for girls

Many girls who love games are still told, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, that gaming or game development “isn’t for them.” This can discourage them from exploring their interests or believing they can succeed in this field.

Unstable or insecure jobs

Jobs in the game industry can involve short-term contracts, sudden project cancellations, or studio closures. This can make career planning harder for young people.

Challenges with funding and resources

Smaller studios, women-led projects, or teams in less well-funded regions often struggle to get financial support, even when they have great ideas.

After presenting this issue, it would be worth discussing with your child and dialogue on these issues. We do not of course have to accept the current situation. Questions you could ask your child

- Should we all just accept or try to change this situation?
- What can be done so these issues are improved?

Although it is not your responsibility to solve the problems in the industry, it may be helpful to know that there are ongoing efforts by industry actors, lawmakers, and researchers to reflect, assess and plan actions to address these issues. Drawing on our work –speaking with a lot of people in the industry and reviewing hundreds of official documents –we have developed a set of recommendations for policymakers and the industry.

Career Reality Check

Many children dream of becoming professional gamers, streamers, or esports celebrities. While these careers exist, they are extremely competitive and unstable.

Very few players earn a stable income through esports, streaming, or game content creation. Success often depends on luck, sponsorships, and constant online presence. Even highly skilled players may not earn reliable income.

Children interested in games may thrive in related careers such as programmer, game designer, etc. (mentioned above).

CASE 3: THE ALGORITHM

Some games are hard to stop playing. But why is that?

Modern games are carefully designed to keep players engaged for as long as possible. They often use mechanics such as daily rewards, streak bonuses, flashing notifications, limited-time events, and surprise rewards. These systems are designed to keep their players wanting to come back.

What can you do?

Help children think critically and recognise when games are trying to keep them online.

Helpful discussion questions:

"Why do you think the game gives daily rewards?"

"Do you want to keep playing, or does the game want you to keep playing?"

"How do you feel when you miss a daily reward?"

The goal is not to ban games, but to help children develop awareness and self-control.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Require clear odds to be displayed before opening a loot box and ban loot boxes for under-18s

Many games include features like loot boxes and microtransactions, which can be confusing or risky for young players.

We recommend that the industry:

- Clearly show the real cost of items and how likely players are to receive them.
- Remove gambling-like features from games for children, or lock them behind strong age checks.
- Add simple spending limits and extra confirmation steps so children cannot make purchases too easily.

Use reliable age checks and respect age ratings

We recommend that:

- Age ratings like PEGI are enforced more strictly across all European countries
- Digital platforms use safe age-verification tools
- Risky features like open chat or in-game purchases are automatically restricted for younger players.

Protect children's data and privacy

We recommend that:

- Games only collect the minimum data needed.
- Children's data is never used for targeted advertising or risky profiling.
- Families have easy tools to access or delete their data.

Create safer online spaces

Children often face cyberbullying, hate speech, or inappropriate behaviour in online games.

We recommend that companies:

- Improve reporting tools so children can easily block or report harmful players.
- Respond quickly to reports and be transparent about how problems are handled.
- Build safety features into games from the start, not as an afterthought

Improve representation and diversity in games

Representation matters for how children see themselves and others.

We recommend that the industry:

- Include more diverse characters: different genders, backgrounds, ages, and abilities.
- Avoid stereotypes, especially of girls, women, and minority groups.
- Make creative teams more diverse so different voices are included in design decisions.

Support fair and healthy work environments

Many young people dream of working in games, but the industry can be demanding.

We recommend that companies:

- Reduce unhealthy working conditions, like extreme overtime (“crunch”).
- Offer fair pathways for young people, including internships, training, and mentorship.
- Support wellbeing and mental health in the workplace.

Encourage cooperation between families, industry, and policymakers

No single group can keep children safe online, cooperation is needed.

We recommend:

- Creating an EU-level body (an Observatory) that monitors child safety in gaming.
- Hearing from children, parents, teachers, and youth workers when rules are created.
- Sharing good practices between countries and companies so safety improves everywhere.

Hopefully, by the time your child grows up, these issues will be improved or fully resolved!

SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

- If a PEGI label on a game for your child has the number 7 on it what does this mean for the game?
 - It is appropriate for children who are 7 years old or older.
 - It will certainly not include sounds that will frighten your child.
 - It may include very mild forms of violence.
- Is it possible for your child to play a game which will ask them to use real money to pay for something?
 - No, because games include their own money and currency.
 - Yes, only for upgrades to disable advertisements.
 - Yes, for upgrades, items and other content.
- What do you know about the children who appear as characters in videogames?
 - About half of the videogame characters are children.
 - Approximately half of the characters who are children are not playable.
 - If children appear in a game, they are usually girls.

Please list below 2 reasons that it is important for children to identify with a game character.

Please list below 2 reasons that it is important that characters in videogames are diverse.

Having studied this guide, what are the 3 things you will change in the way you discuss with your child or behave to support your child more effectively as they play and ensure they remain safe?

Further Reading and Resources

Bellerose, D., Dawkins, U., Keltie, E., Pihl, K., & Third, A. (2014). Children's Rights in the Digital Age: A download from children around the world. UNICEF and Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre.

European Union. (2025). Guide to online and video games. <https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/online-video-games-guide>

fit4internet (Austrian initiative to strengthen digital competencies)

PEGI . What do the labels mean? <https://pegi.info/what-do-the-labels-mean>

Saferinternet.at (Austrian awareness centre for children, carers and teachers)

The School of Social Networks Project. <https://www.schoolofsocialnetworks.org/home/>

UNICEF. How to stop cyberbullying. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/how-to-stop-cyberbullying>

Blinde Kuh (German search engine for children) <https://www.blinde-kuh.de>

Video Games Europe. (2026). Family and Player Tools. <https://www.videogameseurope.eu/parental-controls/>

References

Barz, N., Benick, M., Dörrenbächer-Ulrich, L., & Perels, F. (2023). The Effect of Digital Game-Based Learning Interventions on Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Affective-Motivational Learning Outcomes in School: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 94(2), 193–227. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543231167795>

Brooks, G. A., & Clark, L. (2019). Associations between loot box use, problem gambling and gambling-related cognitions. *Addiction*, 114(11), 1967–1975.

Carnagey, N. L., Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). The effect of video game violence on physiological desensitization to real-life violence. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, 43(3), 489–496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.003>

DeCamp, W. (2019). Parental influence on youth violent video game use. *Social science research*, 82, 195–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2019.04.013>

Ellison, M., & Drew, C. (2019). Using Digital Sandbox Gaming to Improve Creativity Within Boys' Writing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 34(2), 277–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1675823>

Ferguson, C. J. (2015). Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(5), 646–666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615592234>

Gashaj, V., Dapp, L. C., Trninic, D., & Roebbers, C. M. (2021). The effect of video games, exergames and board games on executive functions in kindergarten and 2nd grade: An explorative longitudinal study. *Trends in Neuroscience and Education*, 25, 100162.

Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. M. E. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist*, 69(1), 66–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034857>

- Greitemeyer, T. (2013). Playing video games cooperatively increases empathic concern. *Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000154>
- Griffiths, M. D. (2018). Is the buying of loot boxes in video games a form of gambling or gaming? *Gaming Law Review*, 22(1), 52–54.
- Israel-Fishelson, R., & Hershkovitz, A. (2020). Persistence in a game-based learning environment: The case of elementary school students learning computational thinking. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 58(5), 891–918.
- Kulik J (2025) Understanding how we make accessible games: perspectives from the games industry and players with disabilities. Doctoral dissertation, University of York. White Rose eTheses Online. <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/36768>
- Melzer, A. (2018). Of princesses, paladins, and players: Gender stereotypes in video games. In J. Breuer, D. Pietschmann, B. Liebold, & B. P. Lange (Eds.), *Evolutionary psychology and digital games: Digital hunter-gatherers* (pp. 205–220). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315160825>
- Moral-García, J. E., Rusillo-Magdaleno, A., Patiño-Villada, F. A., & Martínez-López, E. J. (2025). Bullying and cyberbullying are associated with inappropriate use of the internet, cell phones, and video games in children and adolescents. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 15(5), 82. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe15050082>
- Niknejad, S., Mildner, T., Zargham, N., Putze, S., & Malaka, R. (2024). Level up or game over: Exploring how dark patterns shape mobile games. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Mobile and Ubiquitous Multimedia (MUM '24)*, 148–156. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3701571.3701604>
- Ott, M., & Pozzi, F. (2011). Digital games as creativity enablers for children. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 31(10), 1011–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2010.526148>
- Ryan, R. M., Rigby, C. S., & Przybylski, A. (2006). The motivational pull of video games: A self-determination theory approach. *Motivation and emotion*, 30(4), 344–360. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9051-8>
- Schwiddessen, S., & Karius, P. (2018). Watch your loot boxes!—Recent developments and legal assessment in selected key jurisdictions in the EU and US. *Interactive Entertainment Law Review*, 1(1), 17–43.
- Steinkuehler, C. (2016). Parenting and video games. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(4), 357–361.
- Talan, T., Doğan, Y., & Batdı, V. (2020). Efficiency of digital and non-digital educational games: A comparative meta-analysis and a meta-thematic analysis. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 52(4), 474–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2020.1743798>
- UNICEF. (n.d.). How to stop cyberbullying. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/how-to-stop-cyberbullying>
- Uttal, D. H., Meadow, N. G., Tipton, E., Hand, L. L., Alden, A. R., Warren, C., & Newcombe, N. S. (2013). The malleability of spatial skills: a meta-analysis of training studies. *Psychological bulletin*, 139(2), 352.
- Video Games Europe. (2025). All about video games: Annual report on Europe's video games sector. <https://www.videogameseurope.eu/news/annual-data-report-on-europes-video-games-sector-launched-at-gamescom/>
- Veiga, Emerson & Silva, Nabson & Gadelha, Bruno & Oliveira, Horácio & Conte, Tayana. (2025). *Dark Patterns in Games: An Empirical Study of Their Harmfulness*.
- von Meduna, Marc & Steinmetz, Fred & Ante, Lennart & Reynolds, Jennifer & Fiedler, Ingo. (2020). Loot boxes are gambling-like elements in video games with harmful potential: Results from a large-scale population survey. *Technology in Society*, 63. 101395. 10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101395.
- Wang, B., Taylor, L., & Sun, Q. (2018). Families that play together stay together: Investigating family bonding through video games. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4074–4094. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818767667>
- Wells, G., Romhányi, Á., & Steinkuehler, C. (2025). Hate speech and hate-based harassment in online games. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1422422. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1422422>
- Zendle, D., Cairns, P., Barnett, H., & McCall, C. (2020). Paying for loot boxes is linked to problem gambling, regardless of specific features like cash-out and pay-to-win. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 102, 181–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.07.003>
- Zendle, D., Cairns, P. (2018) Video game loot boxes are linked to problem gambling: Results of a large-scale survey. *PLoS ONE* 13(11): e0206767. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0206767>

The GAMEHEARTS project is all about making video games even more awesome and valuable for everyone in Europe! We believe that video games can help our communities grow, create new jobs, keep us healthy, and bring people together. We want to make sure that video games are a big part of the creative and cultural world.

Our team, which includes universities and partners from the UK, Finland, Austria, Netherlands, and Poland, works together to come up with smart ideas. Some of our amazing partners are Ubisoft, the Imperial War Museum, and the London Symphony Orchestra. We look at how video games can make other cultural activities like art, history, and sports more exciting and accessible.

We explore possibilities of more inclusive, engaging, and empowering cultural experiences through studying gaming. Our work includes seven different project packages where universities and industry partners work together to explore current and future trends in the videogame world.

Find us here: www.gamehearts.eu
Or contact us: info@gamehearts.eu



GAMEHEARTS (<https://gamehearts.eu>) has received funding from European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 101132543. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the European Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.