



Tips for Smart Videogaming from ConnectSafely.org

More than just fun 'n' games. They can be a social experience – in a single room or over the Internet. For some families, they can be a way to get together. They're also an evolving art form, like film. And research has shown that many games can be learning tools – for math, probability, economics, strategic thinking, negotiation, and other skills – which is why some educators use them in their classrooms.

Families that play together.... Parents, playing videogames with your kids is a great way to understand gaming and watch their interests and development. A common interest also makes for great family discussions and casual conversations.

Ratings are helpful. Pay attention to the Entertainment Software Rating Board's videogame ratings at ESRB.org, both the age rating (like E for Everyone, T for Teen and M for Mature) and content descriptors (like "Suggestive Themes," "Language" or "Violence"). Remember, some children can handle games rated above their age group, others can't. Age ratings are guidelines – the final decision is up to you.

Preview the game. If after checking the ratings, you're still not sure if a game is appropriate, there are a ton of resources you can consult on the Internet. WhatTheyPlay.com and CommonSenseMedia.org provide game reviews that are written specifically from a parent's perspective.

Tweak the safety settings. All handheld devices and game consoles have helpful safety settings that families will want to go over together. Parental control options on gaming devices include: pre-approving friend requests to play online, controlling the types of games that can be played, disabling Internet access, and limiting the duration or time of day that a child can play.

Trash talk's a reality. It may not be pretty, some of it could be abusive, but it's not necessarily all bad. Just like there's trash talk on the football field, it happens in games and virtual worlds, too. Most games today can be played online, communicating with other players via text chat, talk, or Webcam video. Parents, check in on what happens in videogame play, but know that aggressive and "colorful" language isn't necessarily hurtful. If your child is being harassed online, be sure he or she knows how to deal with it. Often players can block harassers or report them to the game's publisher.

A balanced (activity) diet is good. What really isn't good is *excessive* gaming. Some gaming devices have password-protected settings that parents can use to limit how long and when kids can play. Tech controls can be very helpful, but a focus on values more than rules and talking with your kids are usually the best approach in parenting gamers and all online kids.

Don't hurt yourself! Be aware of how gaming affects players – from sleep patterns to repetitive stress injuries to the chance of hurting people or the furniture with those fast-moving controllers in gamers' hands. Eat, sleep, and take breaks (but don't eat *too* much)!

Consoles play more than games. Some videogame consoles can be used to watch DVDs, stream movies and other video content, surf the Web and communicate. Be aware of game devices' capabilities and their built-in parental controls. When gaming connects to the Net and gamer communities, all your family's regular online-safety rules should apply.