Gaming Consoles

New Technology

Children today have grown up with interactive technology – they can pick up and learn how to use a new console or game within a few minutes and be happily entertained for hours. Over 25 million home games console and hand-held gaming devices have been sold in the UK since 1995 – this is enough for at least one device in every household. In the last 10 years, more than 335 million computer and video games have been bought in the UK – that's five games for every person and at least a dozen games for every household.

Ratings

As most parents and guardians know, not all video games are aimed at children. Games for older players which contain, for example, scenes of violence or swearing, are clearly not suitable for a five-year-old to unwrap this Christmas. All games sold in the UK have age and content ratings, known as the PEGI information system, to help you decide whether the game is suitable for your family, but if you're not familiar with the ratings system, it can feel like something of a minefield.

Online Gaming

While video game consoles are a familiar site in most homes, don't forget the growing popularity of online gaming, where youngsters are able to interact with other gamers over the internet. Parents need to think carefully about what online games their children have access to, and be mindful about how they communicate with others while playing online. It is difficult to regulate online gaming in the same way as physical software, as there is no onus on independent developers to set parental controls on their games and it can be simple for a child to access inappropriate content.

Social Gaming

Another emerging world is "social gaming" – many games now have dedicated websites and forums where players can chat, swap tips and generally integrate into the worldwide gaming community. In fact, most online games now have chat or messaging tools, so that the players can swap their thoughts freely while competing; some games even offer fully-fledged voice communication, so it's imperative you're aware of the sort of games your child is playing, and who they are playing with.

Top Tips for Safe Gaming

1. Familiarise yourself with the PEGI (Pan-European Games Information) rating system to ensure you know what the symbols mean. The PEGI ratings give an indication of the type of content found in a game and its suitability;

2. Ensure that your child is using their console in a well-lit room and that they take regular breaks. Some games can be especially intense, so encourage your children to take regular breaks – at least five minutes every 45-60 minutes as a rule of thumb;

3. Explain to your children how the online environment differs from home or the school playground. Online your children will meet total strangers – some who may not be who they say they are. Often the chat will be uncensored, so they should be cautious about what they say and be careful not to give out private details such as their name, address, email, passwords, telephone numbers or the name of their school;

4. Know what games your children are playing. There are several different game genres today, including sports games, strategy games, role-playing games and first-person shooters;

5. Get involved with what your children are playing, especially online. Ask them to show you any new games they want to play and, better still, join in yourself;

6. Take advantage of any Parental Control settings built in to the game or the console or PC. These controls allow you to limit gameplay options. You can restrict the age ratings of games you're happy for your child to play, and even filter content base on the PEGI content warnings given. Some controls also allow you to block online gameplay and interaction. Consult the instruction manual for your games console to see how these controls can be switched on;

7. Be aware of your children's online contacts. Make a point of asking who they are chatting to online, how they know them and so on. Don't take your children's safety for granted when they are playing online. Apply the same precautions that you would if they were playing outside the home and interacting with others. Don't allow your children to meet up with 'friends' they have met while playing online – remember, not everyone is who they say they are;

8. Ensure that you know how to report inappropriate behaviour or content to moderators or customer support teams on the game websites that your children use;

9. Don't downplay the seriousness of cyber bullying. If your children are being harassed by a classmate or any other player online, follow a game's reporting procedures and log a complaint. Some software allows you to block other players who are rude or abusive;

10. If you don't understand how gameplay works or what it involves, ask your children to show you. And take a look at the **Ask About Games** website (http://www.askaboutgames.com/) for more information and helpful hints.

The 'How To' guide for this week is xbox parental controls.

Don't forget to look at the Think U Know website for further advice on e-safety.