Managing online gaming and digital safety for young people in care

About this briefing paper

As part of our [Fostering Communities programme](#) we will be producing a series of briefing papers for the fostering community in Wales which will cover a range of relevant and useful topics.

This briefing paper will provide a short overview of online gaming for young people in foster care and will provide information on the benefits, risks and some top tips for foster carers.

The Fostering Communities programme

[Fostering Communities](#) is a national programme of improvement and support led by The Fostering Network in Wales and funded by the Welsh Government from 2020 – 2023. The programme will support looked after children and their foster families throughout Wales, by improving wellbeing outcomes for children and increasing the competence, confidence and motivation of the fostering workforce.

The programme is underpinned by a fostering community shared power model, built around workstreams and interventions, which will aim to improve wellbeing in line with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

Through our bespoke programme of work, we will improve the experience of looked after children in Wales, support foster carers to provide permanent, stable and aspiring homes, and ensure that children in foster care are able to make a positive and valued contribution to their own wellbeing. Briefing papers for all the programme workstreams/projects are available upon request.

Introduction

Gaming is increasingly popular with young people, resulting in them spending large amounts of their leisure time on games consoles and online gaming platforms, partly because it is immersive and provides freedom that young people might not otherwise feel they have. It also provides social interaction, is creative and it is, of course, fun!

Young people in care can be particularly vulnerable to gaming risks, owing to perceived feelings of isolation and adverse childhood experiences, leading to their increased vulnerability to grooming and commercial pressures.

Despite gaming's positives, there are also some associated risks, including spending too much time gaming, missing out on sleep, becoming agitated when not playing, commercial pressures and contact risks with strangers.

Foster carers need be empowered to take appropriate decisions regarding online gaming, to consider how they can enable young people to take some risks as part of learning and growing up in this digital world. This briefing paper will, therefore, focus on helping foster carers be better able to devise strategies that enable the fostered young people in their care to have all the benefits possible from online gaming consoles, tablets and mobile phones while, at the same time, managing the potential risks they pose.

Applying safer caring to a digital world

Foster carers will always need to consider the risks balanced with the opportunities, as the internet is now such an integral part of society. Young people need to learn how to use it safely and effectively, so that they can take responsibility for their own wellbeing and safety. It is the foster carers and social workers role to guide and support young people to achieve this and apply [safer caring](#) practice to their care.

Safer caring is about being 'risk-sensible', and not 'risk averse'. It is about foster carers working in partnership with the young people and their parents (wherever possible) and the young person's social worker. It is key for social workers to develop the right safer caring plan for that young person; and day-to-day, understanding and balancing the risks involved in an activity or decision, rather than applying a set of blanket rules in all circumstances.

Foster carers should also feel confident to use their own skills and professional judgement when making decisions about the digital experiences that their young people are permitted to have (delegated authority), in conjunction with their supervising social worker and the young person's social worker.

The benefits of online gaming for young people in care

Gaming has become one of the most popular pastimes for young people, especially in light of the pandemic. There are many reasons it is so compelling for young people, not least because so many games are now part of young people's social dynamic. It can also be a way of socialising when physical get togethers are not possible or practical and many games work on rewards systems, which release endorphins in young people when they 'win' or move to another level.

There are of course, learning and development benefits, such as developing skills including communication, multi-tasking, teamwork, enhancing memory, brain speed and concentration. Young people also use gaming to have fun and relax, to develop friendships, maintain contact with previous foster families or birth parents and siblings

(if appropriate). It can also provide a sense of stability and a world they are familiar and comfortable with.

The risks associated with online gaming

There are and always will be associated risks with playing games online. These can be categorised in to four areas: Content, Contact, Contract and Conduct.

Some online games may be inappropriate for the young person's age and may contain violent or sexually explicit content.

Some online games involve interaction with other players from outside of friendship groups and this could potentially lead to bullying, harassment or abuse.

Games can sometimes involve multiplayer features and this could put young people at risk of being exposed to offensive language or making them vulnerable to contact with others who take advantage of them, for example, child sexual exploitation or grooming.

This refers to young people's behaviour online and how they interact with others. Young people may be at risk because of their own and others online behaviour. For example, engaging in bullying or harassment, how much information they share about themselves, illegal downloads or becoming addicted to online gaming.

Some online games embed marketing and advertising schemes that young people may be exposed to. These can be targeted and enticing, meaning the young person is at risk of inadvertently signing up for other online services, that have hidden costs and terms & conditions.

Safer online gaming

The UK Government and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child health (RCPCH) have provided information and advice for parents and foster carers, with recommendations on how to manage screen time, highlighting the need to balance the time spent online based upon the needs of the individual.

It's a good idea to have boundaries about how often and when the young person you look after can play online games, as it is easy to become addicted. Working together to establish limits, is the best way for them to respect the boundaries you set. A time limit and rules about not gaming at family time or mealtimes, for example, is recommended. Not using after early evening may also be advantageous so they have an opportunity to relax before bedtime.

Take time to review these limits based on other commitments, such as homework and after school activities. It's important to make sure the current rules are still working as they mature.

Moderating time online is important, but it is also equally important to manage what games they are playing to ensure that it is positively impacting on their development and wellbeing. Games that will help them develop skills that they can use in real life scenarios, such as puzzle games or strategy games are hugely beneficial.

You can refer to your fostering service's digital technology policy and Foster Carer's Handbook to help guide you further on this.

Talk to them about who they are playing with and agree that they will check in with you when they add anyone to their contacts or include someone to their gaming circle. They should have a small list of contacts who are people they know in the real world.

Discuss what information is and isn't appropriate to share, particularly personal details that could identify them, or their location. Talk about what they would do if they were bullied online and what the appropriate steps to take are. You can find out more about bullying and advice on coping and making it stop on the ChildLine website here.

Understanding the games that young people are playing and why

Gaming and social media is a huge part of young people's lives. As adults, we may not understand it or see the appeal, but it is important to them, as it is fun and helps them build relationships with their friends.

Be careful not to assume that the young people in your care don't want you to know what they are playing. Ask them what they are playing on, they will most likely enjoy telling you all about it (and win, if you fancy joining them!). Chatting about their gaming activity in a positive way will build trust and help you to understand why it is important to them.

The types of games they are using will depend on the age and what they enjoy doing, and the type of digital device they will be using.

There are ways to help you decide if a game is suitable:

- Video game reviews for parents/foster carers can guide you to make the best decisions for our young people. Here are five video game review sites to reference.
  commonsensemedia.org/game-reviews
  pixelkin.org
  askaboutgames.com
  pluggedin.com/game-reviews
  outcyders.net/reviews

- Check the PEGI rating to make sure it's age appropriate e.g. Fortnite has a PEGI rating of 12 years old.

- Find games that match their interests offline e.g. sports/hobbies.

- Make games a family hobby, so that you can play together and stay engaged in what they like to play. Games such as Animal Crossing, Jeopardy, Lego Duplo World and Wheel of Fortune, all make for a fun multiplayer family activity!

- Encourage the use of a variety of games - find out more here!

There are many popular online games that young people enjoy playing and the list of favourites is constantly evolving. Multiplayer games like Fortnite, Apex Legends and World of Warcraft are engaging both children and young people. Games such as Minecraft also continue to be very popular.

Have a look at some videos on YouTube of the game in action before deciding whether it is appropriate. Although the games may not be especially inappropriate for some players, seeing what it is like will help you make an informed decision about whether it is suitable for your young person.

Multi-play wargames are fast-paced and designed so that rounds last around 20-30 minutes, which is something that's useful to know if you're considering setting time limits. It may be easier for them to stop when they have completed a round rather than being cut off mid-game.

In-game purchases
Some games, such as Fortnite and Apex Legends, are free-to-play, however, they make money from small purchases carried out within the game called 'microtransactions'. Players can buy 'coins' with real money, which can be used to buy 'packs'. Packs are virtual treasure chests (often called 'loot boxes') that contain items that players can use to personalise and improve their game characters.

Discuss in-game purchases with your child and ensure they understand that some things cost real money and that they need to be careful about what they click on. Also make sure they know that they shouldn't make any in-game purchases without your permission.

Voice and text chat
Although playing with people you do not know may not be a risk, it does increase the chance of the young person communicating with somebody who does not have their best interests at heart. Games like Apex Legends, World of Warcraft and Fortnite allow you to set up a 'private party' so young people can only play with people on their friends list. To set this up you can go to the game's control screen between matches. Games like these give players the opportunity to communicate with others online through voice chat. Although this can be enjoyable for some young people, it is important to note that it is not moderated and there is a risk of being exposed to some bad language and possible bullying.

Here are a few ways to help your young person stay safer on chat in these games:

'Ping' system
Fortnite and Apex Legends have a built-in system which lets the player give commands through button clicking. Using the 'ping' system allows players to communicate to play the game without having to use voice and enter into full conversations. If you want to switch voice chat off altogether, you can do this in the game console's settings.

Muting

Make sure that the young person knows how to mute other players. This may be needed if others are saying upsetting things. You can mute players by pressing the speaker icon next to each player on the inventory screen.

Tips for Minecraft
Minecraft has no central parental or privacy settings, but there are methods you can take to reduce a young person's likelihood of exposure to inappropriate language on PC and Xbox Live, such as turning off chat functions. Swear words are automatically filtered out in chats, bu t these can bypassed with spaces in between letters etc.

Consider turning off chat and external website links when playing a multiplayer game online. To do this press the escape key, click options and then 'multiplayer' setting.

For more tips, visit [Common Sense Media](#) which offers advice to parents and foster carers around specific online games.

The Minecraft community is very active outside of the game and many players use YouTube to discuss their projects. It is worthwhile adding parental controls to your YouTube account if your young person is a fan of Minecraft.

Knowing when to switch off from gaming

Most online games are developed with a persuasive element, which encourages players to keep on playing. In many of the newest games, you can interact with other players, which can also entice players to play for longer.

You can help your young person balance their online gaming time with offline activities, by first talking with them to make them aware of the importance of this. Together work on a family agreement and young person's acceptable digital user agreement that sets boundaries on when they play, what they play and how long they can play.

A young person's acceptable digital user agreement should be created and signed off by the foster carer, young person and the young person's social worker, at the start of the placement. You can find a template for this in our publication [Fostering in a Digital World](#).

It's important to be consistent if you have agreed to a set of limits. To help them respect the agreement made, you could set up certain tech tools that stop online gaming access when they have used up their time in a day or a week. Many of the gaming consoles and smartphones have control settings that you can utilise for free.

It can sometimes be hard to stop some games in the middle of playing as there are penalties for quitting and young people may feel they are letting teammates down or need to save at certain points. Give young people a 5 to10 minute notice before they have to stop. This will help them to start winding down the game and not feel an abrupt pressure to stop.

Keeping the technology in shared family spaces, rather than bedrooms, will also help young people stick to the agreement of when they can online game and this will help prevent any gaming after bedtime.

Peer pressure

Young people will sometimes experience peer pressure to play games that are less appropriate. This can make young people feel left out and it can be hard for them to withstand this peer pressure.

Listen to their concerns and show that you value and understand their point of view and the situation that they are in. Try to help them understand why you may not want them playing these games by explaining your reasons and why they are not appropriate.

Try to encourage them towards age-appropriate games that still offer excitement. This will help keep them engaged and will open up their opinions of other available games.

Parental controls

There are some great tools available to help set digital boundaries on games young people can play. All game consoles come equipped with parental controls that can help you manage the types of games young people have access too, how they communicate with others online and the time they can spend on it. These parental controls are password protected to make sure they cannot be changed.

For smartphones, you can set up the app store with a parental email address so that you can view any attempted purchases and then agree them. Have an agreement that they will ask before they download or purchase any new games.

Individual games also offer their own privacy settings, which allow profiles to be private or public, which will help them manage who they are talking to online.

These tools will help minimise the risks, but we recommend spending time talking to your young person about the risks, giving them the tools and knowledge to know what to do if something goes wrong.

How to report concerns or issues

Contact the game moderator if the young person is exposed to inappropriate content or is being bullied by another player. The game moderators will have a distinctive feature/icon next to their name. This will be different for each game. The online moderation team is responsible for making sure that the forums and the game have a nice, friendly atmosphere. Their role consists mostly of intervening early on with players and making them aware of the consequences of not following game rules. You can usually contact a moderator directly in the game, if they are connected at the same time and available.

Most online games will also have features which allow you to block and report users.

To help equip your young person to stay safe, together with them, you can explore where these reporting features are on the game, so that they can take action straightaway.

You can also refer to the resources below for additional support on how to report an issue.

Resources and further reading

- There is some excellent information on our website about this subject.

- **Safer Caring: a new approach**
  This book by The Fostering Network includes a chapter on Safer Caring in a Digital World. It is essential reading for all foster carers.

- There is also an updated supplementary resource on this topic.

- **Fostering in a digital world: a common sense guide**
  Fostered children deserve to live normal lives, but how can we balance this with keeping them as safe as possible in an increasingly digital world? Buy the guide.

- **Fosterline Wales Factsheet – Fostering in a digital world.**

Helpful websites

- Help your children get the most out of the internet in a safe way
  thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/

- Help and advice for families in a digital world
  parentinfo.org/

- For checking out specific apps/games and what children and young people (and parents) say about them.
  net-aware.org.uk and nspcc.org.uk

- For excellent resources for parents, carers and schools
  parentzone.org.uk/home

- For guidance on safety on specific devices a number of organisations provide social media guides –e.g. CEOP and the Safer Internet Centre
  saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/social-media-guides

- If you want to report someone who is behaving suspiciously online towards a child, you should in an emergency contact the emergency services by calling 999, or otherwise make a report to CEOP, the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre, see ceop.gov.uk.

- The UK Safer Internet Centre offer a **helpline for professionals** who work with children across the UK support, giving advice and mediation with online safety issues. The helpline can be contacted by:
email: helpline@saferinternet.org.uk
or telephone on 0844 3814772
(calls on this number are charged at local call rate)

- Child sexual abuse images. Criminal content online, illegal child abuse images should be reported to the Internet Watch Foundation iwf.org.uk/report.

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Get in touch

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