About

This report has been published by the UK Safer Internet Centre and launched for Safer Internet Day 2022.

The UK Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of three leading online safety organisations: Childnet International, Internet Watch Foundation and South West Grid for Learning, with a shared mission to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online. The UK Safer Internet Centre coordinates Safer Internet Day each year, reaching millions of young people, parents and carers, and educators across the UK, giving them the vital information and support they need to keep young people safe online.

Methodology

The quantitative survey was conducted online by Censuswide in November 2021, with a representative sample of 2,013 parents of children aged 8-17 years old and their children aged 8-17 years old (4,026 in total). Censuswide is a full-service research consultancy specialising in consumer and B2B research. This research was conducted on Censuswide's education network and participants under the age of 16 were contacted via their parents or guardians.

Qualitative research was also conducted by Childnet with over 50 young people, aged 8-18 years old, in focus groups.

Young people:

GENDER		
Male	Female	Prefer not to say
1037	969	7

AGE									
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
197	220	222	195	195	240	196	203	161	184

Parents and carers of children aged 8-17 years old:

GENDER		
Male	Female	Prefer not to say
675	1337	1

Foreword

Young people are standing up for safe and respectful online gameplay

This Safer Internet Day comes at an important time. During the unprecedented challenges of the last two years, playing games online has been an important and enjoyable way for young people to stay connected with their friends and, in many ways, has had a positive impact on their emotional well-being through some difficult times. However, our research also reveals the emotional challenges and safety risks that online games can present for young people, including offensive comments, hostile behaviour and frequent contact with players they don't know. Now, more than ever, it is vital to understand and address these challenges and risks to ensure online games can be enjoyable, respectful, and safe for everyone.

Children's first steps online when they are very young are often through playing online games. Our research clearly demonstrates that online gaming is a significant feature of everyday life for young people, with 77% saying they play games online at least once per week. This varies little across genders and across ages from 8 to 17, so it is imperative that conversations with children about online gaming start early.

The vast majority of young people report positive experiences. Of those young people who play online games, 70% tell us they have enjoyed doing so more than ever over the last year, (leading up to November 2021). 71% say online gaming makes them feel relaxed and happy and 61% describe how online games help them to maintain their friendships. Parents agree, with 70% telling us they believe that online games have helped their child to connect with their friends and to relax and unwind over the last year.

As well as supporting young people's emotional well-being and helping them to connect with friends, online games can help them build important skills. 61% of parents and 66% of young people themselves, agree that playing games online has helped them to develop transferable skills, including concentration, teamwork, determination, and problem solving.

While our research demonstrates how online games can help young people connect with friends and build important skills, as well as have a positive emotional impact, it also provides insight into the significant emotional and safety challenges that arise for many young people as they engage in one of their favourite pastimes. Our research highlights some of the challenges in online gaming as anti-social behaviour, including mean or inappropriate comments, tension and breakdowns in friendships, and even bullying. Online games also frequently put young people in contact with players they don't know; 78% of young people who play online games have received a friend request in an online game from a stranger. Online gameplay between strangers can be respectful and safe, but it can also present safety risks, especially where these online interactions extend to invitations to meet in person; almost half, (46%), of young people who play online games tell us this has happened to them.

Given the increasing amount of time that young people are spending playing games online, we must encourage them to tell us more about why it is important to them, what problems they see, what they are already doing to manage risk and what they think others could do to improve safety in playing games online.

Empowering young people is at the heart of what we do. With 59% of young people saying that they want to learn more about how to play online games safely, this Safer Internet Day is a great opportunity for all of us to listen to and help support young people. Our research shows how many young people are already taking matters into their own hands, managing risk, including potentially harmful comments and contact, and reporting or blocking players where they are concerned; all of which is fundamental to being safe online and looking after others.

This Safer Internet Day we look forward to conversations that champion young people's safe internet use and help ensure that they can keep developing skills and positive, respectful relationships in an enjoyable and safe online gaming environment.

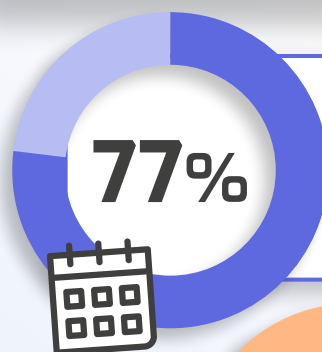**Will Gardner OBE**
Director of the UK Safer Internet Centre

'Online games' refers to computer games, mobile phone apps, web games, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and consoles e.g., PS4, Xbox
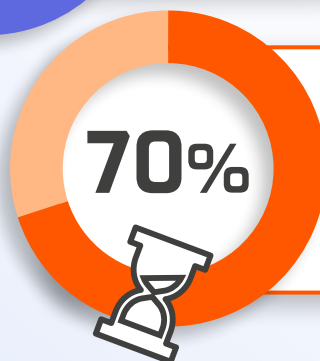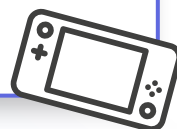
All fun and games? Exploring young people's experiences of respect and relationships in online games

Contents   4

Contents

Young people are connecting through online games more than ever

77% of young people play games online once a week or more

70% of young people who play online games have enjoyed doing so more than ever over the last year*

*The year leading up to November 2021

Increased time playing games online in 2021 and beyond

Online gameplay is a significant feature of everyday life for many young people. 77% play games online once a week or more. This varies little across genders and across age groups from 8 to 17, indicating how important it is to hear from children and teenagers of all ages about their experiences and concerns around online games.

Our research highlights how online gameplay has become increasingly important to young people through the challenges of the pandemic. The vast majority, 85%, of parents say their child spent more time playing games online in 2021 than previously. 65% of young people say that playing games online was an important part of their life in 2021 and 70% of young people who play online games tell us they enjoyed doing so more than ever over the last year, (leading up to November 2021). During a time of continued disruption from school closures and social distancing, online games have been an important way for young people to relax and connect with their friends and even to support their emotional well-being through challenging circumstances.
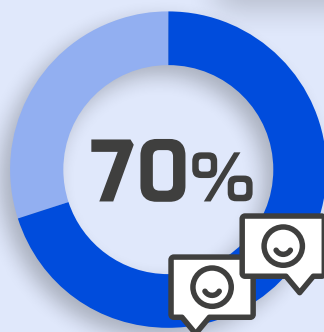
85% of parents say their child spent more time playing games online in 2021 than previously

Emotional well-being, respectful relationships and skills building in online games

How do online games support young people's emotional well-being?

70% of parents think online games have helped their child connect with their friends over the last year.*

*The year leading up to November 2021

The majority of young people report positive and enjoyable experiences of online gaming. Over half of young people (58%), say playing games online changes their mood positively, 59% say it makes them feel good about themselves and 71% of young people who play online games say doing so makes them feel relaxed and happy.

Specifically, young people report how performing well in a game and cooperating with friends has a positive emotional impact. When asked how various situations in an online game might make them feel, 65% of young people say that being ranked high on a leader board would make them feel happy or proud and 70% say working as a team with their friends would make them feel this way.

The majority of young people also describe how playing games online can provide relief from negative feelings, for example, making them feel less stressed and worried, (61%), less lonely, (60%) and more able to forget about things that make them unhappy, (65%).

Parents echo the idea that online games have had an important role to play in young people's emotional well-being though the disruption and challenges of the pandemic, with 70% of parents telling us they think online games have helped their child to relax and unwind over the last year, (leading up to November 2021).

"Playing games online can be a really good escape, especially during stressful times at school. Being able to sit down, chat with your friends and play something with no real-world consequences if you mess up - unlike in school - can be a really good release of pent-up stress and worry for me."

Childnet Digital Champion

How does playing online games make young people feel?

Playing online games makes me feel…	% of young people
Relaxed and happy	71%
Good about myself	59%
Less stressed and worried	61%
Less lonely	60%

Our research also demonstrates how some young people consider online gaming to be an important part of their identity, with almost half, (48%), of young people who play online games saying that if they couldn't game online anymore, they would feel like they have lost a part of who they are.

Friendships are, of course, an important part of young people's emotional well-being and online games play an important role here too. Both young people and parents believe that online games have helped young people connect with their friends through the recent challenging times. 61% of young people describe how playing games online has helped them to spend more time with friends online than in real life and 70% of parents agree that online games have helped their child to connect with their friends over the last year, (leading up to November 2021).

How do online games help young people build practical and social skills?

Our research highlights how online games provide young people with opportunities to develop important practical skills and social skills. They may play an online game alone, as a single player, or with other people; against or alongside their friends as well as with players they don't know. In multi-player games, types of interactions may include making or receiving comments from other players, trading digital items as part of the game, playing as part of a team, or even leading a team. These interactions provide opportunities to develop social skills including respect and teamwork.

Both young people and parents agree that online gaming can help young people build skills. Specifically, 61% of parents and 66% of young people agree that playing games online has helped them to develop transferable skills, including concentration, teamwork, determination, and problem solving. 63% of young people feel that online games have allowed them to be more creative and over half, (51%), tell us that playing games online has allowed them to learn about other cultures and interact with people all over the world.
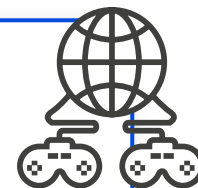
"I have learned many problem-solving skills based on certain games, like escape rooms or detective games, but from other games, like racing games or shooter games, I have improved my observation, concentration and hand-eye coordination."

Childnet Digital Champion

"I really enjoy games I can be more creative with, where you can let your imagination do whatever you want, especially when you can play them with friends as well. You can all just collaborate and it's not just the same thing every time."

Secondary school pupil

Over half, (59%), of young people tell us that online games have made them more competitive. We also know that many enjoy performing well in online games, with 65% of young people describing how being ranked high on a leader board would make them feel happy or proud. It would be interesting to explore the topic of competitiveness further with young people and ask, for example, whether the competitiveness they often develop through online gaming makes them more competitive in other areas of their life and whether they perceive increased competitiveness as a positive or negative effect of playing online games.
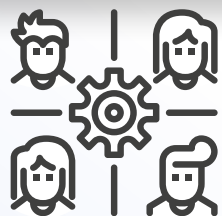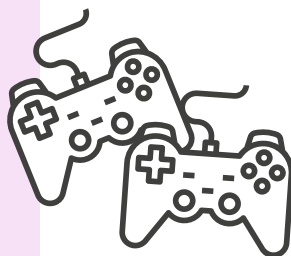
66%
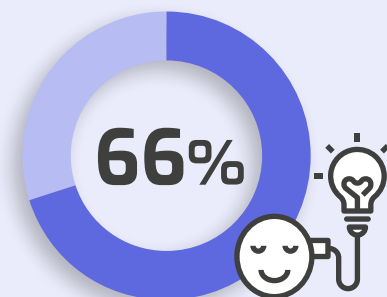
of young people who play games online say it has allowed them to develop and learn new skills such as determination and problem solving

70%

of young people said working as a team with their friends in an online game would make them feel happy or proud

52%

of young people who play online games say it has taught them to respect other people

49%

of young people tell us that online games make them think about how they act around other people in the real world

How do online games foster positive, respectful relationships?

Online games often give young people the opportunity to work with others as part of a team; something many feel very positive about; 70% of young people say working as a team with their friends in an online game would make them feel happy or proud.

The development of social skills through online game interactions can extend to more positive and respectful relationships in wider life. Over half, (52%), of young people who play online games say it has taught them to respect other people and almost half, (49%), tell us that online games make them think about how they act around other people in the real world. 43% of young people who play games go as far as saying that doing so has helped them to become a better person.

Emotional challenges and disrespectful behaviour

What emotional challenges and disrespectful behaviour do young people face in online gaming?

As well as the opportunity to build skills, learn about other cultures and develop respectful relationships, online gaming can present young people with emotional challenges as well as disrespectful or even offensive or hostile behaviour from other players. Young people playing online games are often faced with offensive or mean comments, players who cheat others out of digital items, falling out with friends, feeling under pressure to do well or even, being bullied within an online game. The majority of young people describe how they would feel at least one negative emotion in response to various online game situations, including seeing someone being mean or nasty (73%), seeing someone cheat (73%), and falling out with a friend (68%).[1] Encouragingly, our research also reveals how many young people are taking action to look after themselves and others when faced with offensive, mean or disrespectful behaviour from other players.

"An example of someone not respecting people online is if they win a game against someone then some people might say in the in-game chat: 'you're so bad at the game, you're a loser.' Things like that. To be respectful online you need to not say things like that."

Primary school pupil

"Especially if someone's lost or if someone's won or if someone's said something, they are a lot meaner than they probably would be in real life because they know they can get away with saying worse. So, you see a lot more vile comments towards people online or in gaming lobbies."

Secondary school pupil

When playing a game online, how might the following situations make you feel?

| Online game scenario	% of young people selecting at least one of the following negative emotions: 'upset/sad', 'annoyed', 'angry', 'attacked', 'scared' or 'shocked', in response
Seeing someone being mean or nasty	73%
Seeing someone cheat	73%
Experiencing a scam, including being asked for items, or being scammed into thinking they're going to get a good reward	70%
Falling out with a friend	68%
Not getting help from a friend	56%
Someone who beats me at a game	46%

"When people say bad words to me, I don't really like it. It just makes me very angry and I don't want to play anymore."
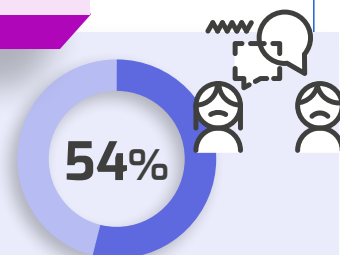
Primary school pupil

1. Percentages are calculated by respondents selecting at least one of the following negative emotions 'upset/sad', 'annoyed', 'angry', 'attacked', 'scared' or 'shocked'.

# How do young people deal with offensive, mean, or disrespectful gameplay?
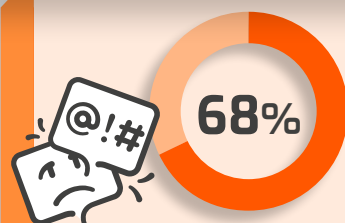
68%

of young people have experienced offensive or mean comments from other players

54%

of parents say child has alerted them to friendships breaking down because of online games

What are you* most likely to do if you come across a negative comment or mean person when playing an online game?

Block the person	34%
Report it	23%
Ignore it	23%
Talk to a parent or guardian	21%
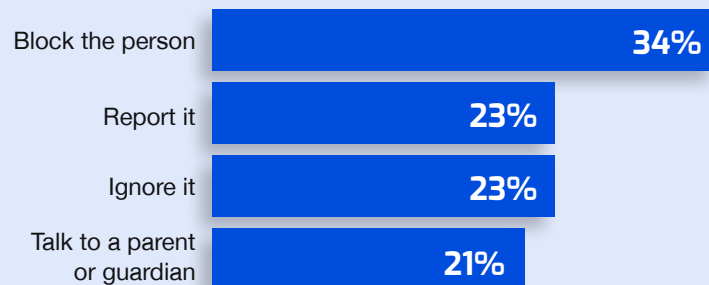
*Young people aged 8 to 17

Only 14% of young people who play online games say they have actually said something rude or mean to someone they were playing with. However, many more, 68%, have experienced offensive or mean comments from other players and 67% report experiencing rude comments from people they don't know.

Encouragingly, some young people are taking positive action when faced with disrespectful behaviour in an online game, for example, 34% are most likely to respond by blocking someone when coming into contact with a mean person or negative comments, 23% say they would report it, 23% say they would ignore it and 21% say they would talk to a parent or guardian about it. Parents also describe how young people often discuss player behaviour with them, with 69% of parents telling us their child has alerted them to bad language and mean comments within an online game.

While many young people describe how much they enjoy working as a team with friends in online games, our research also highlights how online games can cause tension in friendships. This may happen, for example, where players don't get help from a friend in a game, with over half, (56%), of young people describing how this would make them feel a negative emotion, such as upset, sad or angry. When faced with such a situation, many young people discuss their concerns with parents; over half, (54%), of parents tell us their child has alerted them to friendships breaking down because of online games.

"When people say rude things to me, I usually ignore them and play another game."

Primary school pupil

"I had some people throw some rude comments generally in the game. I told them to stop, and I reported their account."
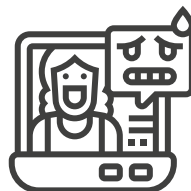
Childnet Digital Champion

Dealing with pressure and bullying in online games

For some young people, emotional challenges may come from comparing their performance in online games to their peers. 51% of young people feel there is a lot of pressure to do well in an online game. It would be interesting to explore this further with young people, for example, to understand where or who this pressure comes from, how it makes them feel and how it impacts their experience and enjoyment of online game play.

Almost one third of young people who play games online, (29%), report having been bullied within an online game. There is a need to understand more about what kind of bullying young people are experiencing in online games, how seriously it is affecting their emotional and mental well-being, and what needs to be done to tackle it.
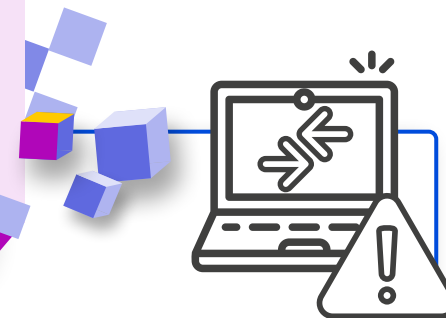
How do young people deal with dishonesty and cheating?

Trades and swaps are a feature of online games, with 67% of young people who play games online saying they have experienced offers to trade or swap digital items such as weapons, tokens, lives, or powers in a game. However, players are not always honest in these interactions. Over half of young people who play online games, (55%), say they have been let down with game trades and almost half, (49%), say they have been cheated out of money or items they have won, within an online game. Interestingly, only 21% of young people who play online games reported actually sharing a gift or trading with someone in a game.

This disparity, between the high number of young people who have received offers to trade items, and the much smaller number who actually participate in trades, may indicate young people are often ignoring or declining these offers to trade or swap digital items. It would be interesting to explore the topic further with young people, to understand more, for example, about how they feel about trades or swaps, how they respond to them, their levels of trust or mistrust around them and how this impacts their enjoyment and levels of trust generally in online gaming.
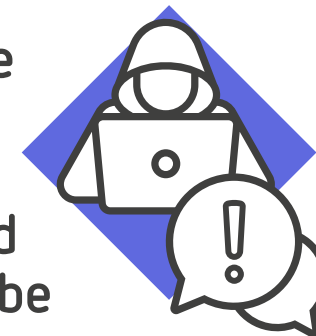
55% of young people who play online games say they have been let down with game trades

Dealing with strangers and learning to play safely

"Older children know that chatting to random strangers in online games makes you more vulnerable. Whereas younger children will think it's another friend to make when it could be a scammer."

Primary School Pupil

Our research clearly demonstrates that contact from strangers and interactions with people they don't know are a regular feature of online gameplay for children as young as 8. In some cases, this contact extends to invitations to interact outside the game, online, or even face to face. Many young people are concerned about coming into contact with strangers in online games, with 43% saying that talking to a stranger in an online game would make them feel a negative emotion such as upset, angry, attacked or even scared, and 41% saying that receiving a friend request from a stranger in an online game would make them feel this way. Encouragingly, our research also shows how some young people are taking action to protect themselves, including alerting parents, where they are concerned.

% of young people selecting at least one of the following negative emotions 'upset/sad', 'annoyed', 'angry', 'attacked', 'scared' or 'shocked', in response to these online game scenarios:

Talking to a stranger	43%
Receiving a friend request from a stranger	41%

What gaming interactions do young people have with people they don't know?

Young people report a high degree of interaction with people they don't know in online games. The vast majority, 78%, of young people who play online games report receiving friend requests in an online game from people they don't know. 67% have received rude comments from people they don't know and over half, (56%), say they have experienced gifts or offers within a game from people they don't know.
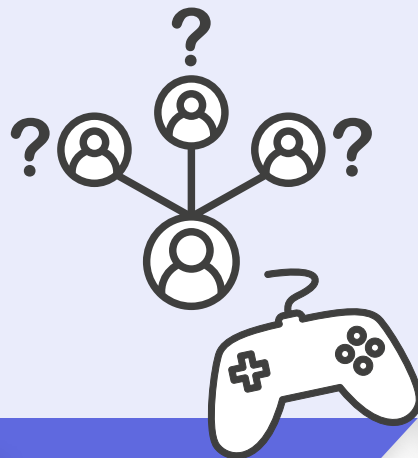
In some cases, this contact from strangers in an online game develops into requests to meet or interact outside the game.

Of young people who play games online, almost half, (49%), have experienced offers to trade or swap real-life items such as money, merchandise, or fan art outside the game and, again, almost half, (46%), have received requests or invitations to meet up with strangers in person. Parental concern is high, with 66% of parents worrying about their child meeting someone 'bad' through online games. A small number of young people who play games online report either agreeing to meet up with someone from an online game, (8%), or asking to meet up with someone from an online game, (7%). This suggests that, for the most part, where young people do receive such invitations, they ignore or decline them. This said, it is concerning that almost half of young people who play games online are receiving these requests for in-person contact.
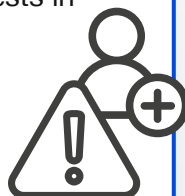
There is a clear need to understand the nature of these interactions better and to urgently ensure that we are equipping young people to look after themselves when approached by people they don't know via an online game.
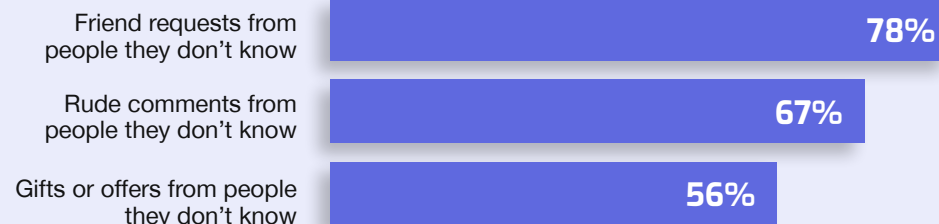
How do young people deal with contact from people they are unsure about?

Young people often do take action to protect themselves when they come across someone they are not sure about in an online game. Over half, 53%, of young people who play online games say they have reported a stranger that they have met in an online game because they didn't know them, with 25% saying they do this once a week or more. Furthermore, 61% of parents tell us that their child has alerted them to a new person that they are unsure about in an online game.

Interestingly, while young people do sometimes take to protect themselves when they come across a person they are unsure about in an online game, our research also suggests that most young people are comfortable interacting with people they don't know in online games. Only 27% of young people say they would like online games to only allow people to play with people they know. On the other hand, our research did demonstrate how many young people would like more boundaries to protect themselves from unwanted contact from strangers, with 60% of young people saying they want to learn more about how to avoid strangers sending them requests in online games. Overall, this suggests that many young people expect to be able to compete against people they don't know in online games but many would also like to feel better equipped to deal with unwanted contact from strangers.

% of young people who play games online who have experienced the following in an online game:

Friend requests from people they don't know — **78%**

Rude comments from people they don't know — **67%**

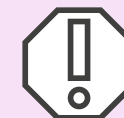Gifts or offers from people they don't know — **56%**

46% of young people who play games online have received requests or invitations to meet up with strangers in person

53% of young people who play games online reported a stranger they have met in an online game because they didn't know them

60% of young people say they want to learn more about how to avoid strangers sending them requests in online games
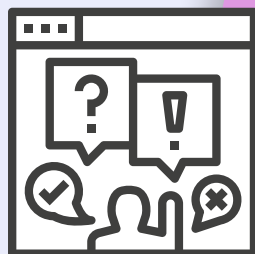
How do young people learn to play online safely?

40%
of young people teach themselves how to play a new online game, when playing it for the first time

59%
of young people want to learn more about how to play online games safely

While our research demonstrated how many young people are employing strategies such as reporting a stranger in an online game or alerting a parent, it also highlighted how young people rely mostly on themselves when learning a new game. When asked how they learn how to play a new online game for the first time, young people most commonly told us that they teach themselves, (40%). Just over one third, (34%), say they teach themselves how to play a new online game 'safely'.

Other people have some influence here. Young people also told as they learn to play new online games from friends, (24%), the game or game provider, (20%), parents, (16%), or teachers, (11%). Interestingly, 62% of parents say their child has asked them to show them how to play a game. This could indicate that, even where young people are learning how to play a new game themselves, they often ask parents for guidance. The fact that young people are so reliant on teaching themselves how to play safely reminds us how important it is to ensure that online games intended for use by children and teenagers are designed to be as safe as possible. Young people are clearly asking for more support, with over half (59%), saying they want to learn more about how to play online games safely. Younger children are most concerned about this, with 70% of 8 year olds and 69% of 9 year olds telling us they want to learn more about how to play online games safely, (compared with 46% of 16 year olds and 45% of 17 year olds).

"I learned everything about gaming myself in terms of safety because it wasn't really covered in school. I teach my brother now because he's not really taught that in school. My mum's completely clueless with where to go with that so I'm teaching her as well."

Secondary School Pupil

In-app Purchases and Financial Safety

70% of young people who play games online have made a purchase within a game

31% report doing this at least once per week

While our research did not look extensively at financial safety in online gameplay, this is something that could be explored further, given that players are often presented with opportunities to make in-game purchases such as items or points that improve a character or enhance the playing experience. The vast majority, 70%, of young people who play games online say they have made a purchase within a game and almost a third, (31%), report doing this at least once per week. While almost all young people who make these purchases say they have sought permission at least once from a parent or guardian, (95%), they sometimes don't. Only 56% say they ask permission every time, indicating that, where young people do make in-game purchases, it is often done independently, without parental involvement. Interestingly, there was not significant variation across age groups from ages 8 to 17 in response to any of these questions, suggesting children as young as 8 are sometimes making in-game purchases, without parental permission.

When asked what would make online games safer and more enjoyable for everyone, almost 1 in 5 young people, (19%), said they would like more information on how to be careful with in-game purchases. Given that almost a third of young people who play games online are making some kind of purchase within an online game at least once a week, it would be helpful to explore the topic further with young people to better understand, for example, what types of purchases they are making within online games, how much they are spending and to what extent they understand or take steps to protect their personal and financial information when making purchases.

Opening up dialogue between young people and parents

"My mum really wants to know what I'm playing and wants to know what it's about. I try to tell her, but she still doesn't get it. She gets it when she plays it though."

Primary School Pupil

What conversations are young people and parents having around online games?

Parents report a high degree of dialogue with young people about online games. Almost all parents, (92%), say they talk to their child about playing an online game safely and over half, (57%), say they do so at least once a week. Furthermore, the increased time that young people spent playing online games in 2021 compared to previously, (as reported by 85% of parents), was matched with increased focus on the issue from parents; 65% of parents describe how, throughout 2021, they gained a better understanding of the benefits and risks of their child being online.

Young people are often taking the lead in these conversations. As well as teaching themselves how to play online safely, dialogue with parents is a significant strategy young people use to manage risk. The majority of parents describe how their child has alerted them to potential safety risks in an online game, including content they are unsure about or that makes them feel uncomfortable, (65%), inappropriate comments, (66%), or a new person they are unsure about, (61%). Young people also ask parents to get involved in online games. 78% of parents say their child has asked them to play an online game with them and half of parents say they play online games with their child(ren).

65%

of young people have alerted a parent to content in an online game that they are unsure about or uncomfortable with

92%

of parents talk to their child about playing an online game safely

50%

of parents play online games with their child(ren)

There is a notable proportion however, of both parents and young people, who find conversations around online games challenging. Just over a third, (34%), of parents say they find it difficult to start conversations with their child about their online life and almost a third, (31%), of young people say they find it hard to talk to their parents about online games. Interestingly, among parents, men were notably more likely than women to say they find it difficult to start conversations with their child about their online life; 43% of men said this compared to 26% of women. This feedback from parents and young people demonstrates that there is still work to be done to support all families, and potentially dads in particular, to have conversations at home that support safe and enjoyable internet use and online gaming.

"Parents don't particularly know what to do if their kids come to them with a problem around streaming or gaming because that world is slightly different so you can't really just apply the same rules that you're taught for the rest of the internet into those particular areas."

Secondary School Pupil

34%

of parents find it difficult to start conversations with their child about their online life

31%

of young people say they find it hard to talk to their parents about online games

Everyone's responsibility to make online games respectful and safe

% of young people who agree with these statements:

"I have a responsibility to report potentially harmful comments or people in online games." **72%**

"I have a responsibility to educate my friends and family about the issues with online games." **58%**

Young people are taking responsibility and want to do more

Young people are taking responsibility for the safety of themselves and others in online games and are keen to discuss the issues with others and learn what more they can do. They also have ideas for changes to online games features that could help create a safer and more respectful gameplay environment.

Many young people feel a strong sense of responsibility to report potential safety challenges when they arise. 71% feel they have a responsibility to report potentially harmful online games and 72% feel they have a responsibility to report potentially harmful comments or potentially harmful people in online games. Young people also want to share their experiences and concerns with others. Over half, (58%), say they feel they have a responsibility to educate their friends and family about the issues with online games and almost half, (48%), want to get more involved in promoting safer online games.

As well as a desire to share their experiences and concerns, many young people want to learn more about how to protect themselves and others. 59% say they want to learn more about how to safely play games online and 60% want to learn more about how to avoid strangers sending them requests in online games.
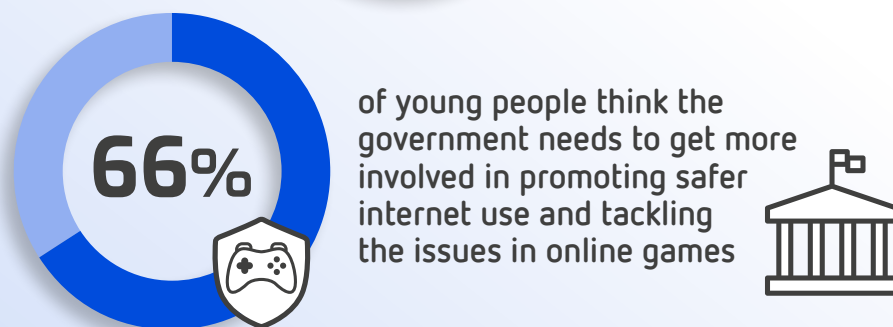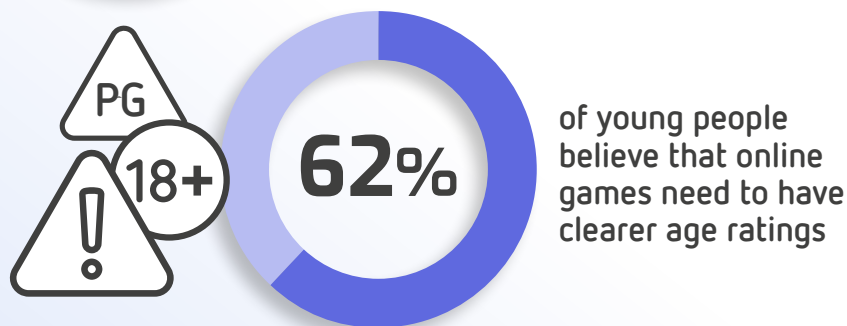
"Most people and games online are harmless but on the odd occasion that is not the case. I think young people would feel safer when knowing how to handle the situation."

Childnet Digital Champion

What changes do young people want to see?

64% of young people would like to know more about what happens when they report someone within an online game

PG 18+

62% of young people believe that online games need to have clearer age ratings

66% of young people think the government needs to get more involved in promoting safer internet use and tackling the issues in online games

As well as wanting to discuss and strategise with other stakeholders around the challenges in online games, young people have ideas on how to create a safer and more respectful gameplay environment. Around one third of young people want to be able to easily report mean comments or strangers, (35%), and are asking for privacy settings in online games, (32%). Just over one quarter, (26%), want to be able to turn off the comments section. Most strikingly, 62% believe that online games need to have clearer age ratings and 64% would like to know more about what happens when they report someone within an online game.

This feedback from young people highlights specific areas that online games platforms could explore further and act on, to help make online gameplay more enjoyable, respectful and safe for everyone.

As well as putting forward ideas for changes that could create a safer and more respectful gameplay environment, young people are calling on government to act. The majority, 66%, think the government needs to get more involved in promoting safer internet use and tackling the issues in online games.

"I don't personally stream, but I think if you are going to then it is very important to take a close look at the settings you have in place, like what personal information is visible on your account, and be mindful of the information you are sharing."

Childnet Digital Champion

Young People's Charter 2022

The UK Safer Internet Centre has worked with young people and children to develop a Young People's Charter for Safer Internet Day 2022 on how parents and carers, online service providers and the government can play their part in helping to create a safe and fun online gaming environment for everyone.

We have produced this Charter from speaking to primary and secondary age children in focus groups, consulting Childnet Digital Leaders and Digital Champions, surveying young people, and reviewing the findings from our latest research. This charter of five key points comes directly from the young people we spoke to.

We deserve an internet where we can enjoy playing games safely, and we call on the government and online stakeholders to listen to our voice. We want to see:

▶ Every young person educated on online safety:

Our message is clear. Safer Internet Day 2022 research tells us that almost six in ten young people want to learn more about how to safely play games online.

Currently, a third of us teach ourselves how to play new online games safely, while one in five learn from friends. From an early age, children need regular online safety education, incorporating digital media literacy, as part of the school curriculum.

We call on the government to ensure we receive the education and support we need to safely navigate the online world. We also want gaming companies to ensure that users know how to stay safe on their services, so we can enjoy the interactive entertainment spaces that we use.

> "The best thing would be educating young people more on the dangers and what to do if you feel cornered, scared or in any danger."
> **Digital Champion**

> "More needs to be done in terms of teaching children how to be safe in online games because a lot of games require interacting with strangers."
> **Digital Champion**

> "Schools should say more on how to protect yourself if there is online bullying going on or if somebody's trying to hack you and find out things about you."
> **Primary Pupil**

▶ Young people knowing what actions to take:

We regularly see other online gamers being mean or nasty, cheating in games, and falling out with their peers. As young people, we have a responsibility to call out and report mean or nasty comments, but we also know from Safer Internet Day 2022 research that many children are likely to respond by blocking someone or simply leaving a game.

We want every young person in the UK to know exactly what to do when faced with harmful or offensive comments and how best to report negative interactions. We also want to know what action the platform, game or app will take and how people within online games are being encouraged to create a friendly, positive and welcoming environment.

> "We want it to be more specific on the way you can report people, not just vague comments or vague ideas of what people have done. Make the users of the website know if they've done wrong and what rules they've broken."
> **Secondary Pupil**

> "We want you to teach kids to stop bullying online and to write letters to parents about letting kids play appropriate games."
> **Primary Pupil**

> "Gaming is just like social media in a sense that people have identities on these games and they are socialising with other people, so they need to be aware of how they can manage that."
> **Digital Champion**

▶ Parents and carers learning about online gaming:

While 92% of parents report talking to their child about playing an online game safely – with 57% doing so at least once a week – we think parents and carers should learn more about the games we are playing and how we are interacting with others online.

Starting those conversations or picking up a controller will ensure parents and carers are better informed and equipped to help us safely navigate the online world.

Understanding the age ratings on games, how young people communicate with friends and strangers online, and how we can respond to negative interactions within games platform or streaming services will benefit both young people and their parents and carers.

"A good place to start for parents is being aware of what your kids are playing and the general gist of what those games consist of, so if they are having trouble you have an idea of what they're talking about and are equipped to help."

Digital Champion

"We want parents to talk to their children about what could happen, the bad things but also the good things, so they feel more comfortable telling them if anything has happened."

Secondary Pupil

"We want parents to play with us to see what kinds of games we are playing and to help us find the games that are better for our age."

Primary Pupil

▶ Gaming companies putting safety first:

We call on gaming companies and online service providers to take the lead and ensure that their platforms are safe for those using them. You have the power to create games and apps that are user friendly, transparent, safe and supportive environments for young people.

Ensuring that rules and settings within games and their chat features are clear and easily accessible is one way you can do that, but that is just the start.

We want you to listen to young people's views to help tackle issues on your platforms and ensure your games can be enjoyed by everyone.

"Gaming is no longer something restricted to teenagers in their rooms; people of all ages use these platforms, so filters and revised set ups need to be available for those younger audiences to be safe and aware in every aspect of their usage."

Digital Champion

"We want you to make sure people who are constantly being bad and being rude to other people get permanently banned or get a warning because if they keep on bullying, people are going to be upset."

Primary Pupil

"It's up to you guys, the developers and the platforms that you moderate, to listen to young people about what the issues are for the audiences of your games to really make an impact and improve your platform."

Secondary Pupil

▶ The government holding platforms to account:

As Safer Internet Day 2022 research shows, young people are playing games virtually more than ever before. It is one of our favourite things to do, makes us feel good, and helps us to spend time with our friends.

We are calling on the government to ensure we can continue enjoying games and interacting with our friends online within a safe and positive environment.

You can help to achieve this by holding games companies to account, ensuring that their platforms put safety first – and by providing high quality online safety education for all young people as part of the school curriculum.

"I think it is up to the government to be aware and take into account the ever-changing world that is the internet and all its denominations, not just social media."

Digital Champion

"What I want for the government to do is to make gaming better for the community and for people, so they don't get fooled and have a fun time playing their games."

Secondary Pupil

"We want you to make sure that children aren't being treated unfairly by making it a law so that people can't be rude to other players."

Primary Pupil

"I want the government to check games before they get downloaded so they know they're all safe and so no one will get bullied or trolled."

Secondary Pupil

Conclusion

It is clear that young people are spending more time playing games online than ever before and that their experience of this is positive in many ways. Online gameplay helps them build valuable skills such as concentration, teamwork, determination, and problem solving and is an important source of enjoyment and emotional well-being. Young people have told us how much they have valued the opportunity to relax and connect with friends through online games through the disruption and challenges of recent times and even how online games have taught them how to respect other people and think about how they act around other people in the real world. However, as well as these benefits, this increased time spent playing online games brings potential challenges to both young people's emotional well-being and their safety. While playing online games many young people are navigating challenges such as offensive or mean comments, players who cheat others out of digital items, falling out with friends, feeling under pressure to do well or even being bullied within an online game.

Our research highlights how children as young as 8, are regularly encountering content and contact in online games, which could represent a risk to their safety, including rude or inappropriate comments, friend requests from strangers, and even invitations to meet in person from people they don't know. It is vital that all of us involved in ensuring that online gameplay is respectful and safe for everyone build on this research and consult young people to develop a deeper understanding of what they are encountering, how it affects them and how they respond to it. Only then can we best support them with the tools and skills they need to navigate disrespectful behaviour, protect their emotional well-being and stay safe when playing games online.
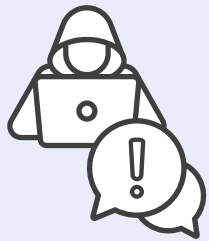
Our recommendations

▶ **Young people** want and need to be able to play games online safely, treating other players with respect and being treated respectfully themselves. It is clear from our research that many young people are taking responsibility to protect themselves, both from disrespectful behaviour from other players and potentially harmful contact from people they don't know. Most young people feel they have a responsibility to report concerns about potential harm and to educate their friends and family. Most want to learn more about how to play online games safely and many actually want to get more involved in promoting safer online games. In short, young people are committed to playing their part to make online gameplay respectful and safe for everyone.

Our qualitative research shows young people have valuable experience that we must learn from and ideas that they want to voice in this crucial conversation. It is vital to consult with young people of all ages, given our research shows that children as young as 8 are receiving invitations to meet in person from people they don't know, while playing games online. We have worked with youth representatives to reflect on our research findings and on their views and harnessed this into the Young People's Charter, included on page 21 of this report. We strongly urge all stakeholders to take the Charter on board and take action, where called to.

▶ **Parents and carers** are an important source of support and guidance for young people as they navigate the online gaming space and make decisions about what behaviour is acceptable and respectful among players as well as how they should respond to something they are unsure about or that makes them feel unsafe. Our research makes it clear that, in online games, mean or disrespectful behaviour or contact from people they don't know can have a negative impact on young people, at times leaving them feeling angry, upset, sad, annoyed, or even feeling attacked or scared. Regular and open conversations at home with young people about what kind of player behaviour and contact they are encountering in online games, how they feel about it and what they should do in situations that upset or concern them or make them feel unsafe, will help young people feel supported and able to ask questions and open up when they encounter challenges. Our research shows that, for children as young as 8, playing online games is an increasingly regular feature of how they spend their time; conversations at home must start early. If parents and carers are unsure or troubled by anything their children are experiencing in online games or simply want to understand better why online gameplay is important to them, Safer Internet Day is a great opportunity to start those conversations.

Read the Young People's Charter on page 21, where youth representatives have outlined how parents and carers, online service providers and the government can play their part in helping to create a safe and fun online gaming environment for everyone.
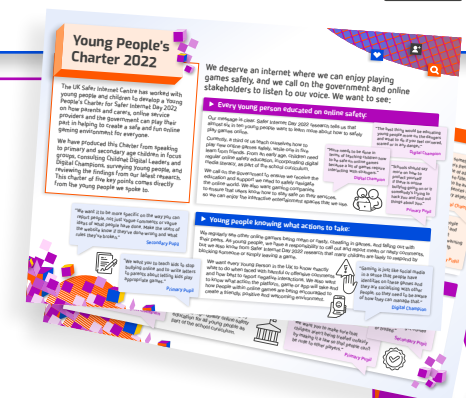
Our recommendations

▶ **Schools** are already educating and supporting young people to stay safe and protect their emotional well-being online. However, our research shows that most young people want to learn more about how to play online games safely and about specific challenges such as how to avoid strangers sending them requests in online games. Facilitating discussion and learning on these vitally important topics is where schools have a crucial role to play.

We also know that interactions in online games can often cause young people's friendships to break down. As such, many young people could benefit from further support to learn how to play online respectfully and how to resolve tensions and disagreements, an important part of all young people's emotional and social development. In-school discussions around respectful online game play could be especially helpful in tackling the challenge of bullying in online games, something almost 1/3 of young people, (29%), say has happened to them.
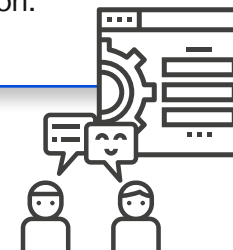
Schools can help empower young people to play online respectfully, foster positive relationships and keep themselves and others safe from harm. This education needs to be engaging and it is vital that schools draw on young people's own experiences of online gaming and their ideas to make it relevant.
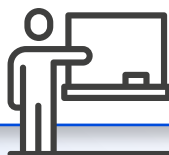
▶ **Online Games Platforms** have a crucial role to play in ensuring online game play is respectful, enjoyable and safe for everyone and young people are asking them to take action. We urge online games platforms to heed this call and to respond to the demands of young people outlined in the Young People's Charter on page 21, including improved protection from the emotional harm and risks to safety that online games can present.

On a practical level, young people would benefit from improved game features that allow them, for example, to more easily report mean comments or strangers and to maintain their privacy where they choose to. Many young people also highlighted how they would value more guidance on how to avoid strangers sending them requests in online games as well as clearer age ratings; two further areas where online games platforms could consider features that would better support these demands. Finally, many young people are also asking to hear more from online games platforms about what they are doing to protect young people when problems arise, for example, they want to know more about what happens when they report someone within an online game.

Above all, there is an enormous opportunity to learn from the experiences of young people, who are now spending more time playing games online than ever before. We ask online games platforms to not only build better tools and features to help young people protect their emotional well-being and stay safe, but to consult with them and give them a voice as they move forward and take action.
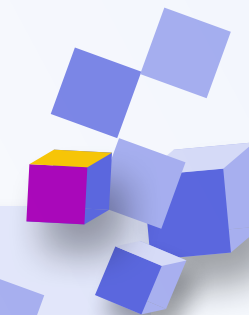
All fun and games? Exploring young people's experiences of respect and relationships in online games

Our recommendations   26

Our recommendations

▶ **Government** has an important role to play to engage with and support all other stakeholders; young people, parents and families, teachers and schools and online games platforms, to help make online games safe for everyone. Young people are clear in this demand, with the majority saying they think the government needs to get more involved in promoting safer internet use and tackling the issues in online games.

Specifically, government has an opportunity to ensure that education policies and support for schools, as well as practical classroom resources, are geared towards ensuring that young people of all ages are equipped to play online games respectfully and safely. We now call on government to listen to the clear demands of young people for government to get more involved in tackling the challenges. We also urge government to collaborate with other stakeholders, including schools and online games platforms, so that young people have the support, knowledge, skills, and tools to play games online respectfully and safely.
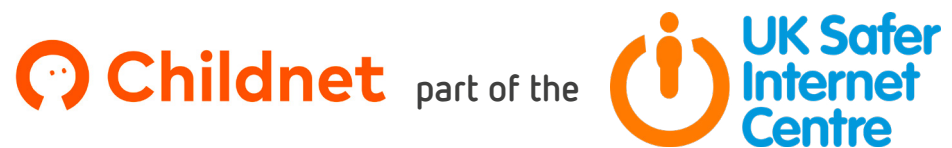
Young people are clearly standing up for safe and respectful online gameplay. It is time for the rest of us to listen to young people, to examine the real risks in online gameplay and to open up the conversation around what more we can do to make online gameplay an enjoyable, respectful and safe experience for all young people.

Produced by