

# 2008 MediaWise<sup>®</sup> Parents' Guide to Video Games



## Getting Ready for MediaWise Family Gaming

If you're a parent, this year brings good news for you. Parents have never before had so many effective tools and resources to help make video games a healthy part of family life. From parental controls that allow you to limit the kinds of games your kids play to a wealth of online information explaining game content, you have the power to make healthy video choices for your family.

But all of the parental control technology in the world is no substitute for carefully thinking about the role of video games in your family's life and establishing a healthy dialogue with your kids. Whether your child has yet to begin gaming or is already an old pro, it's never too late to reclaim the powerful role of parent in your child's gaming life.

Start by making sure all the adults in the home are on the same page. That way, you can ensure that your children are following the same standards no matter who is in charge at the moment. Together, ask yourself some of the bigger questions:

- What role do we want game playing to have in our house?
- What are some of the benefits we would like to see come out of game play? What are we most worried about?
- Where do we want game playing to happen?
- What sort of content are we comfortable with?
- Are we comfortable with online play?
- How much time do we want our children to spend gaming?

With the answers to these questions you can begin to decide the limits you make for your kids' game play. It's also extremely important to discuss the limits with your children. Make sure they know what's allowed and what's not. Make sure they understand why you're setting limits—because not all video games and video game experiences are meant for kids. Finally, be sure they understand the consequences they will experience if they don't follow the rules of the road.

As your kids grow, their relationship with video games will too. Technology evolves, new games are released, and new options pop up nearly every day. Stay informed. Use the ESRB tools and resources. Surf the Web to find out what other parents are saying. Above all, talk with your kids about the games they play and the ones they want to play.

This guide provides parents with a quick reference to the information you need to make safe choices for your family. Following a few simple steps, you can become MediaWise and develop healthy family togetherness. You'll know what to do every step of the way—from entering a retail store to purchasing the right game, bringing it home and finally enjoying it with your family.

## The Power to Make Healthy Choices for Your Family

Video games are becoming a part of everyday family life. Whether your family has a console, a computer, or handheld device, it's a pretty safe bet your children play video games. With careful planning, video games offer good family fun. As technology evolves, video games have become more useful and a source of more fun for families. Most consoles offer Internet browsing and social networking capabilities. Some games even promote exercise, encourage cooperative fun for all ages and educate kids while they play.

But with so many new advances, it's important to remember one thing that hasn't changed: the influence of video games, like all media, have a powerful impact on your kids. While there are an increasing number of options and tools to ensure that video games play a positive role in family life, parents need to be vigilant to protect their kids from negative impacts like online dangers, inappropriate content, over use and addiction.

## Weighing the Benefits Against the Risks

Video games can be a lot of fun and a healthy part of sharing family time. They can even be educational. Of course, allowing your children to play video games poses certain risks and challenges. Any activity involves some risk and it's important to remember that there's nothing inherently wrong with video games. But because video games require so much focus and can immerse players in whole other worlds, too much gaming and too much of the wrong games can have a serious impact on young people.

Make sure you're aware of these challenges and risks when you make a family video game plan.

## ***Video Game and Internet Addiction***

Millions of kids love video games, especially boys. Our national survey revealed that 92 percent of kids age 2-17 play regularly. That translates into 59 million young players. The overwhelming majority of these kids play their video games, do their homework, keep up their responsibilities, and have other interests. No problem. So it's clear that video and computer games are not inherently bad for kids.

Some kids, however, get hooked. Computer game addiction is real and growing. Our research shows that almost one out of seven game players shows signs of an addiction. If you think that you or your child is struggling with video game addiction, seek professional help.

## ***Cyberbullying***

Cyberbullying can mean sending derogatory insults or threats in messages, often many of them. Sometimes it entails circulating humiliating information or pictures of a youngster among peers. Sometimes it involves demeaning postings on Web sites. Now that video games often involve online play and social networking, cyberbullying can become an unwelcome part of gaming.

In many ways, this is the same problem kids have had to put up with for years. But in other ways, cyberbullying is a new kind of problem. Unlike the bullies of yesteryear, cyberbullies can get to their prey right in their own bedrooms. For the victims of cyberbullies, this access to the most private spaces and moments can be quite traumatizing. They can feel that there is no escape from their torturous social lives, or worse yet, that they are never safe from threatened harm. Make sure you talk with your kids about cyberbullying. Let them know they can tell you if they're being bullied through a video game.

## ***Aggression and Disrespect***

Whoever tells the stories defines the culture. That isn't new. It's been true for thousands of years. What is new is that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, we have delegated more and more of the story telling function to mass media like video games. Some video games stories inform, educate and even inspire our youth. Too many, however, don't. Too many specialize in dishing out heaping servings of violence, disrespect and degradation.

The research linking violent media with attitudes and behavior is so overwhelming that few researchers even bother to dispute that screen violence has an effect on the kids watching it. Does this mean that children

directly mimic what they see on screens? Not necessarily. But an even more pervasive effect of violent media is not so much violent behavior, but rather the culture of disrespect it creates and nourishes. What stories are we telling? Make sure you talk with your kids about the values and stories they see in video games. Make sure they realize these stories and values aren't necessarily appropriate in the real world. More importantly, make sure your kids aren't playing games with age-inappropriate stories.

### ***The Big Three: Too Much Time, The Wrong Content, Sedentary Lifestyles***

Since the dawn of video games three problems have raised the eyebrows of parents and experts alike. You've probably heard a lot about them before, but they're not going away anytime soon, so here is a quick review:

#### **Too Much Time**

Many video games require a lot of playing time to master. Most kids want to spend more time in front of video game screens than is healthy. A large body of research shows that too much screen time is linked to a host of problems including lower school performance. Some screen time is OK for kids over two years old, but only when it's balanced with a variety of other activities.

#### **The Wrong Content: M-Rated Games and Other Content issues**

Some games aren't meant for kids. Games rated M are intended for players 17 and older, but because they are interactive such games can be much more influential than R-rated movies. It's important to make sure that your kids are only playing games appropriate for their age in keeping with your particular family values.

#### **Sedentary Lifestyles: The Obesity Connection**

Lifestyles that include a large amount of media use (often including video games) have been linked to sedentary lifestyles by a number of studies. But there's not reason that video game players can't play games, eat healthy foods, and get enough exercise. Make sure your kids don't think playing video games is a reason to pig out and turn into a couch potato.

## A Video Game Glossary

The world of video games includes a whole new vocabulary. Here are a few of the terms you need to know to navigate your way to MediaWise choices.

### The Basics:

**Console** - the machine that allows you to play a video game. Popular consoles include the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii.

**Handheld Device** - a portable machine that allows you to play a video game. Popular handhelds include the PlayStation PSP and Nintendo DS.

**Online Play** - a mode of play that allows players to connect to the Internet in order to play with and against other people connected to the Internet. Many games offer both a regular mode, in which players do not interact with other people, and an online mode.

**Parental Controls** - settings on a console or computer that allow parents to determine the rating content of the games their kids may play as well as the amount of time games are played. Parents use parental controls to prevent games with age-inappropriate content from functioning on their child's console or computer.

### More Specialized Terms:

**Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs)** - a genre of online computer role-playing that bring together players from all over the globe in a large game world. In these games, players work alone or together to gain points and accomplish goals within the game.

**Online social networking** - a Web site offering social connection by supporting user-created content that includes personal profiles, chat rooms, blogs, clubs, and the ability to post music, videos and audio commentary. Examples of online social networking sites popular among teens include MySpace, Xanga and Friendster.

**Profile** - a quick online description of a person, usually including name, nickname, or username, personal information such as age, birthday and interests, and photographs. Most profiles have a unique URL that can be visited directly.

## Using the ratings

Using the video game ratings is easy to do and almost always the first step in choosing the right game for your kids. Every game made for a console and nearly every game made for a computer includes a rating determined by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Grouped by age, the categories provide easy reference and a quick assessment of a game's age-appropriateness. Most stores that sell video games offer customers information on the ratings.

### ***ESRB Ratings Descriptions***



#### **Early Childhood**

Titles rated EC (Early Childhood) have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.



#### **Everyone**

Titles rated E (Everyone) have content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.



#### **Everyone 10+**

Titles rated E10+ (Everyone 10 and older) have content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.



#### **Teen**

Titles rated T (Teen) have content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language.



#### **Mature**

Titles rated M (Mature) have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.



#### **Adults Only**

Titles rated AO (Adults Only) have content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.



#### **Rating Pending**

Titles listed as RP (Rating Pending) have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating. (This symbol appears only in advertising prior to a game's release.)

### ***Using the Box***

Every video game is sold in a box that displays one of these ratings on the front. On the back of the box, more extensive content information is provided with the rating symbol. This information explains the levels of violence, sexual content, language, and other elements a game contains. Make sure you read this information in addition to the symbol. The back of the box usually features screen shots and other copy that describe the content of the game.

### ***Online Play***

Although games that allow online play do have an ESRB rating these games also provide a warning: "Online Interactions Not Rated By The ESRB." In other words, games with the online option have been evaluated, but that doesn't mean everyone who plays them will follow these standards.

Parents need to take special precautions with online-capable games. Please refer to the section of this guide entitled "Making Online Play Safe For Your Kids" for more information.

### ***Ratings Summaries***

Starting this year, the ESRB now offers more extensive ratings summaries. Providing parents with more information than the symbol and content descriptors, these summaries give an in-depth assessment of each game.

Every ESRB rating is available via its Web site, [esrb.org](http://esrb.org), in addition to a the ParenTools newsletter that keeps parents up to date on new releases, and a special ESRB site for mobile devices, [m.esrb.org](http://m.esrb.org). ESRB.org also allows parents to download a searchable "widget" that parents can use to find the rating and rating summary of any game.

These new tools offer parents more information than similar ratings systems for any other entertainment medium. This information is also easier to access than other ratings information. Make sure you take advantage of the helpful resources mentioned above. At the same time, make sure you're aware of the potential dangers video games pose, seeking the advice of outside resources, other parents and your own observations. While helpful and welcome, these new tools from the ESRB are not substitute for MediaWise parenting.

## Parent-Friendly Game Reviews and Other Informational Resources

The Internet offers a wide array of alternative sources of information on games. These reviews, recommendations and commentaries often offer a perspective and a level of detail that many parents find helpful. Useful resources include commonsensemedia.com, whattheyplay.com, and gamerdad.com

### **Ratings: A Useful Start**

While the ESRB ratings are great tool for parents who want an initial sense of a game, they do not replace parental involvement and supervision. Often you can use the ratings to narrow your choices but the only way to know if a game is right for your family is to use alternative information resources, talk to other parents, and ultimately supervise game play or play with your child.

## Parental Controls

All the major consoles as well as computers running the Windows Vista operating system allow parents to determine which games their kids can play. Sony's handheld PSP also offers parental control settings. These parental controls use the ESRB ratings to set age-appropriate limits for kids and they can be used to prevent or limit online play and Internet access. But unless parents know how to use these parental controls, they won't work.

Each of the parental controls systems is different. Find the instructions for your console or computer and get to know your options. Follow the step-by-step instructions to set the right boundaries for your family.

### **Xbox 360 Family Settings (link\*)**

Select the "System" tab in the Xbox Dashboard with the left stick or round pad on your controller. After choosing "Family Settings," select "Console Controls" with the green A button. Choose "Game Ratings," then select the ESRB symbol that represents the highest rating you want to allow.

To "Set Pass Code" choose this option and double click the green A button. Then enter a four-button pass code. Make sure you select "Done" after you make changes and "Yes, Save Changes" to activate your new settings.

The "Family Timer" setting allows you to limit the total amount of time the console may be used each day and week. You can also manage access to Microsoft's online service and block access to movie DVDs by MPAA rating.

### **Sony PlayStation 3 and PSP (PlayStation Portable) Parental Controls**

Both Sony's console and handheld device use the same parental controls system. Use these steps to set up your controls or alter them:

Select Settings, using the left stick or directional pad. Then press the X button to select "Security Settings." Next select "Parental Control." You'll see a number system indicating various levels of ratings restrictions. Select the one that is right for you child.

The parental controls for the Web browser can also be found in "Security Settings." Choose "Internet Browser Start Control," then activate the Internet blocking tool by selecting "On" or "Off." "On" means Internet access is blocked.

To make sure your settings are secure you need to choose a password. Again, in "Security Settings," this time choose "Change Password." The first time you do so, choose the default password 0000, and then punch in your new password. You can also block access to the DVD player by MPA rating.

### **Nintendo Wii**

Choose "Wii Options" in the Wii Menu. In "Wii Settings" click on "Wii System Settings 2" and then, in "Parental Controls" click on "Yes" so you can create a four-digit PIN.

Then, in "Game Settings and PIN," find "Highest Game Rating Allowed" and choose one of the ESRB ratings. Make sure you press "OK," "Confirm," and "Settings Complete."

The Wii settings can also be used to prevent use of the "Wii Shop Channel," restrict online user-to-user communication and the exchange of user-generated content, and block use of the "Internet Channel" and/or "News Channel."

### **Windows Vista Parental Controls**

In the lower left-hand corner of your screen, click on the "Start" button to find the "Instant Search" menu. Type "par" to search for "Parental Controls." Once you're in the "Settings" menu "Create a new user account." After creating a username, you will be able to block certain kinds of Internet content and determine which ESRB ratings are allowable for computer games

Later, go to "User Controls," then "Parental Controls" to monitor your kids' use using the "Activity Viewer."

## Eliminating and Limiting Online Play

Again, even if a game has a safe ESRB rating, online play can put your kids into contact with people who do not have the same standards. Using the Parental Controls described above, you can take steps to prevent your kids' from having inappropriate experiences in online play. But changing the settings alone won't keep your children safe. You have to decide how to use them, and before that, you have to know how.

Setting appropriate online boundaries requires that you understand your options and what you need to watch out for. Here are a few things you should think about when you're making your family's choices for online play.

### **Buddy Lists**

Just as you care about who your children play with in the real world, you should care about their playmates in the online world. Unlike the real world, however, the online environment is not limited by geography or age. Often, anyone can play with anyone...unless you set limits on your child's buddy list. A buddy list is a predetermined list of people that a user can interact with. Make sure you help your kids set their buddy lists so they include safe, appropriate friends.

### **Mods**

A "mod," or modification of an existing game's software, is usually not created by the people who made the game itself. Sometimes these "mods" just offer expanded gameplay options. Frequently, however, these mods insert mature content into the game. It's important to understand that even if a game has a safe ESRB rating, the mod is not rated. Make sure you limit the kinds of mods your kids use.

### **Cameras and Chatting**

Many games offer players the option to chat with people while they play and some use cameras so players can see each other. Sometimes these features are an important part of game play. Make sure you know if your kids are playing these kinds of games and who they're playing them with. These considerations should factor into your decisions when helping your kids with buddy lists and rating limitations.

### **Monitoring Use, Addressing Red Flags**

Some of the consoles and computers allow you to go back and monitor the kind of online experiences your kids are having. If you use this feature, make sure you discuss online play with your children to determine if you need to make changes to the settings you've selected. You can block people from their buddy lists, mute their ability to chat online, or even eliminate online play altogether. You also have the option to report offensive or dangerous users who have contacted your kids.

## Three guidelines every family should follow:

1. Don't disclose personal information online. Chat and interactive online features offer kids the chance to talk with other people. Just as they would never disclose personal information to a stranger in the real world, they shouldn't offer such information to their online acquaintances.
2. Make a habit of playing games together or watching your kids play. Even if you find them boring or confusing, it's important to understand why your kids love the games they play. Make sure you regularly play games with them or watch them play so you understand what they're doing in their virtual worlds.
3. Balance video games with other healthy activities. Video games can be fun and even helpful, but they shouldn't crowd out the other important things kids do as they grow up. Make sure your kids gaming is balanced with reading, exercise, playing with friends and studying for school.

## Parent Checklist

Use the following checklist to make sure you are ready for MediaWise gaming in your home. If you can't check every item on the list, think about why and how you can take steps to check it off.

- I understand the ESRB ratings
- I am familiar with all the games, consoles, devices and computers my kids use.
- I understand how to use the parental controls.
- I have made a plan for the kinds of games and gaming experiences I want my kids to have.
- I have made sure the other adults in the home understand and agree to this plan.
- I make sure I check in with my kids to see if there is anything new in their gaming lives.

## Parent Tips

The following list of tips covers most of the major issues associated with video games. But remember the most important tip of all: watch what your kids watch! Staying involved in your kids' lives is the most important way to help them make healthy choices.

1. **LIMIT** playing time. MediaWise recommends no more than one hour a day.
2. **USE** other content sources and reviews to help you understand the game. A lot of the major online games do have ESRB ratings. Other games do not. Check out online reviews for a sense of the game.
3. **AVOID** first-person shooter, killing games. There are plenty of great online games with age-appropriate content from which to choose. Try fantasy problem solving games instead of shoot-em-ups.
4. **WATCH** for warning signs of video game addiction. Stop obsessive playing before it gets out of control. Find the MediaWise addiction survey at [mediawise.org](http://mediawise.org) for more information.
5. **DO NOT PUT** video games or computers in kids' bedrooms. Putting consoles and computers in family areas make it easier to monitor playing time and content.
6. **PLAY** and **ENJOY** games with your kids. Online games are constantly evolving. Be sure to watch or play with your kids as they advance in any game, so you can monitor content and connect with your kids.
7. **TALK** with your kids about griefers (players who give other players a hard time online) and cyberbullying. Come up with house rules of "netiquette" and follow through with consequences if these are broken. Encourage your kids to talk to you if they see inappropriate behavior online.
8. **MEETING** online gaming friends requires adult supervision. Your kids may feel quite close to other gamers they meet online. Remind them that these people are still strangers and that it isn't safe to meet them alone.
9. **SET** clear house rules around Internet/game use and time. Require that homework and chores be done before playing.
10. **DISCUSS** teamwork and good sportsmanship with your child. Kids can learn great lessons in collaboration and teamwork in online games. Discuss the value of being a respectful and positive team player. Ask about what they've learned from the other players on their team or in their guild.
11. **ENCOURAGE** your child to play with friends "off line," away from the computer.