

# ONLINE SAFETY NEWSLETTER

Providing online safety information for parents and carers

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## What's in the games your children are playing?

Trying to work out the risks associated with the games your children are playing can be really difficult for parents. This article looks at some of the different issues parents need to consider when deciding if a game is suitable for their children.

### Content

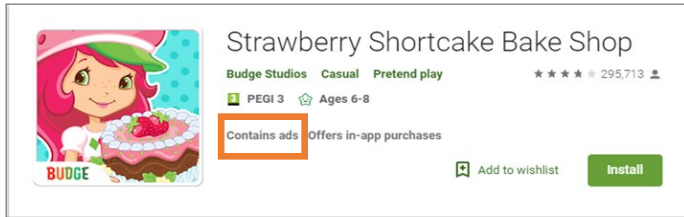
The game content for all downloadable games or those that come in a box will have a PEGI rating of 3, 7, 12, 16 or 18 showing the recommended minimum age for the game. For non-game apps there is also the PG rating—note that, unlike films, this does not mean that it is suitable for most people. There are also eight descriptors such as violence, fear, bad language, and online game play. It is not against the law

for parents to let their children play games that have a PEGI rating older than the child, but we regularly find 8 and 9 year olds playing 12-rated games such as Fortnite, which can cause behavioural and other issues for schools and parents.



### Online contact

Parents need to be fully aware of the possible con-



tact with others that their children can have. Some games, such as Minecraft and Roblox, have the ability to chat online either within or outside of the game and also to have online 'friends'. In some games this can be switched off and locked by parents but in some games it cannot. This contact can be via voice or text chat. It is not necessary to have a gaming headset to chat other people: even a cheap set of ear buds usually have a tiny microphone. Games consoles and other specialised chat apps such as Discord can also be used to chat both in and out of game.

### Adverts

Are you aware of the ads your children are seeing online on the apps they play on a daily basis? Both free and paid apps can contain adverts. In one study of 135 apps from the Google Play store aimed at under 5s, all 85 free apps had advertising

but 88% of the remaining 50 paid apps also contained ads. Some games and apps aimed at children contain ads, for example YouTube Kids.

As well as the unsuitable ads for gambling or other age-inappropriate content, there are also other problems. Characters in a game will sometimes encourage players to buy 'better' locked items rather than the free items; or there may be pop ups that when clicked state the feature is only available in the paid version of an app. Sometimes the characters in a game may actually cry if a player does not unlock a paid part of a game. Many of these are not even labelled as adverts and the line between entertainment and advertising is increasingly blurred. Furthermore, the X to close an ad may be so small it is difficult to see and difficult to tap. Finally, depending on how the device has been set up, children and young people may accidentally buy apps or items, sometimes spending huge amounts of money.

While the charity Childnet have indicated they think UK authorities need to look at ads in games, currently it is down to parents to check and choose

appropriate apps for their children. In the Google Play Store, the app information will tell you if there are ads and if there are in-app purchases – see the example (left). On the app store for iOS (Apple products) in-app purchases are indicated but ads are not.

### Loot boxes

Lots of games contain loot boxes, which are a special type of in-app purchase. Loot boxes contain items that can be used in the game, for example a new character to play or a new vehicle or weapon. In some games, the player cannot see before they buy. Scientists have found a link between loot boxes and problem gambling. Rather than stopping playing the games, parents are recommended to consider stopping children buying the loot boxes.



## How to report harmful content online

If children are using online platforms, it is likely that at some point they will experience content that is upsetting or concerning. Here are our top tips for reporting content online.

**Use the reporting tools on the app.** Most harmful content breaches the community guidelines on online sites but in order to get it removed you need to report it.

**Select the correct report type.** Usually your report will be looked at by a computer rather than a person. The computer will be trying to match the information to the type of report (for example – impersonation or abusive/threatening behaviour); if they don't match, the computer will not find anything wrong and the content will not be removed. Remember machines cannot pick up context in the same way humans can.

**The person you have reported won't know it's you.** Sometimes people are concerned that if you report a person, they will know it was you. No mainstream platform will inform someone who reported their content.

If the platform you are reporting to is not responding to your online report, you can also report to <https://reportharmfulcontent.online/> and the UK Safer Internet Centre can help to mediate with the platform to get content removed. The site also contains lots of advice about how to report to different sites and guides on different topics.

## How much is too much (screen time)?

A recent report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has found that there are not safe limits that can be applied to screen time, but that children with higher screen time tend to have a less healthy diet, increased depressive symptoms, poorer educational outcomes, and poorer sleep and fitness. The report recommends the following:

- 1. Screen time in younger children should be controlled by a responsible adult.** The older a child is, the more autonomous they will be but this should still be under the overall guidance of an adult.
- 2. Screen time should not interfere with the activities that families want to do together.** There may be times, such as mealtimes that families wish to declare as screen free. Younger children in particular benefit from face-to-face interaction as they need to develop skills to cope with the real world.
- 3. Screens should be avoided** for an hour before bedtime (for children and adults)
- 4. Eating in front of screens** needs to be monitored carefully as it is easy to lose track of how much is being eaten during screen sessions.
- 5. Families should agree boundaries** for each person in the family. Ensure that adults also set a

good example and conform to any agreed boundaries.



However, the amount of time spent online is not the whole story. There are some online activities that promote creativity such as music, art or film/video apps and others that assist homework, which clearly are not the same as gaming or browsing on social media.

In relation to boundaries, it is important that children and young people understand why limits are being set and that parents and carers stick with them, however much they are pestered.

Finally, make sure that the family has some quality screen time together whether that be gaming, YouTube or watching some films.

Further information can be found at <https://bit.ly/2CNqAqX>

We asked children and young people for their views on screen time...

<b>Positives about screen time</b> 	<b>Negatives about screen time</b> 
Gives you knowledge It's entertaining and enjoyable Provides you with more opportunities to reach a wider community	Keeps you awake Hurts your eyes and stresses you out Loss of social connection

109 children and young people aged 11-24 years took part in this engagement exercise.

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