



IFB GAMING

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A Parent & Guardian's Guide to Gaming

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Understanding age ratings, setting up safety controls, making sure every child can play, and talking to your child about the games they play.



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A PARENT & GUARDIAN'S GUIDE TO GAMING

Before You Start

BEFORE YOU START

Gaming is, for the overwhelming majority of children, a genuinely positive part of growing up: a place to build friendships, problem-solve, and belong. That includes children who game differently, whether because of a physical, sensory, or cognitive disability. The goal here is to help you support that safely and fully, not to make you afraid of it.

Why This Guide Exists

Gaming today is not what it was ten years ago, and most parenting advice hasn't caught up. Games are no longer solitary, offline experiences. They are social platforms, communication tools, storefronts, and, for many children, one of the primary places they build friendships and identity.

That means the questions worth asking have changed too. It's no longer just "is this game too violent?" It's who can message my child while they play, can they spend real money without me knowing, how would I actually notice if something was going wrong, and, for some families, can my child even physically play this game in the first place?

This guide covers six things:

- Understanding age ratings properly
- Setting up the safety tools that actually work
- Making sure every child, including disabled children, can actually access and enjoy gaming
- Recognising the difference between healthy and concerning engagement
- Understanding the emotional side of gaming
- Having conversations that keep the door open rather than closing it



UNDERSTANDING AGE RATINGS

PEGI Explained

PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) is the official age rating system used across the UK and most of Europe. It rates games by age suitability, not difficulty, and it's a legal requirement, not just a suggestion: in the UK, it's a criminal offence to sell a PEGI 12, 16, or 18 game to someone below that age.

Rating	What it means	Content guidance
PEGI 3	Suitable for all ages	No violence beyond very mild, cartoon-style content. No bad language.
PEGI 7	Suitable for young children	Mild, non-realistic violence. May contain content that could frighten younger children.
PEGI 12	Suitable for age 12+	Fantasy violence toward human-like characters, mild bad language, sexual innuendo.
PEGI 16	Suitable for age 16+	Realistic-looking violence, stronger language, depictions of drug or alcohol use.
PEGI 18	Adults only	Gross violence, explicit sexual content, gambling simulation, unrestricted online chat.

What changed in 2026, and why it matters more than ever

In March 2026, PEGI made its most significant reform in over a decade. Starting June 2026, ratings now account for how a game is designed to keep children playing and spending, not just its violent or sexual content:

- **Unrestricted chat** — games with no ability to block, mute, or report other players are now automatically rated PEGI 18.
- **Loot boxes** — paid “loot box” style random items now push a game to at least PEGI 16.
- **Play-by-appointment** — daily rewards that punish a child for not logging in now trigger a higher rating.
- **Purchase urgency** — time-limited or quantity-limited “buy now or miss out” purchases now push a game to at least PEGI 12.

A RATING IS A STARTING POINT, NOT A DECISION

A mature 11-year-old may cope fine with a PEGI 12 game. A sensitive 13-year-old might not. Use the rating alongside your own knowledge of your child, and check the specific content descriptors rather than just the headline number.



SETTING UP SAFETY

The Layered Approach to Safety

No single setting or app will fully protect your child. Console controls only work on that console. Router filtering doesn't follow your child to a friend's house. A single parental control app won't catch everything a determined teenager tries to route around.

What actually works is layering several imperfect tools together, so the gap in one is covered by another:

- **Router-level filtering** — covers every device on your home Wi-Fi, including ones you haven't set up individually.
- **Device and console-level controls** — age ratings, spending limits, and communication settings.
- **App-level settings** — within the specific games and chat apps your child actually uses.
- **Ongoing conversation** — the layer that catches everything technology can't, and the one research shows matters most.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The NSPCC consistently finds that children who feel able to talk to a parent about what they encounter online are far better protected than those relying on restrictions alone. Controls buy you time and reduce accidental exposure. Conversation is what actually keeps a child safe when something goes wrong.



PLATFORM BY PLATFORM

Setting Up Parental Controls

PlayStation (PS5)

- Settings → Family and Parental Controls → Family Management
- Add your child as a Family Member with an accurate date of birth, this drives the default restrictions
- Set an age rating limit (PS5 applies PEGI automatically for UK accounts)
- Set spending controls: a monthly limit, or approval for every purchase, setting the limit to zero and requiring approval is genuinely effective
- Restrict who can contact your child via voice chat, messages, and shared content

Xbox

- Managed via the Xbox Family Settings app on your own phone, or Microsoft Family Safety online
- Set content restrictions by age rating
- Set play time schedules and spending limits
- Check Family Safety's activity reports to notice patterns, not guess

Nintendo Switch / Switch 2

- Download the free Nintendo Switch Parental Controls app and link it via the on-screen code
- Set an age-based content category: Young Child, Child, or Teen, or customise manually
- Switch 2: GameChat requires your approval for every contact and every call in real time
- Set a PIN directly on the console so the app can't simply be unlinked to bypass everything

A practical example: Minecraft

Minecraft's settings are genuinely confusing, scattered across Microsoft accounts, Xbox privacy settings, and device-level controls. If your child plays Minecraft (Bedrock Edition), check three layers: Microsoft Family Safety settings, Xbox privacy settings (which apply inside the game even on non-Xbox devices), and your device's own parental controls. All three are free and worth the fifteen minutes it takes.



EVERY CHILD CAN PLAY

Accessible Gaming

Around one in five gamers experiences some form of disability, whether physical, sensory, or cognitive. For those families, accessibility isn't a bonus feature, it's the difference between a child being able to play at all and being shut out entirely. Modern consoles have invested heavily in built-in accessibility tools, and a genuine support ecosystem exists for anything those tools don't cover.

PlayStation (PS5)

Settings → Accessibility includes: Screen Reader (adjustable speech speed), Closed Captions (size, colour, background), Colour Correction and Zoom, Mono Audio, Chat Transcription, and full button remapping. Individual games list their own accessibility support on the PlayStation Store, open the side panel or press triangle on a game's page to check before you buy.

Xbox

Xbox Accessibility settings include Narrator (a built-in screen reader), Copilot Mode (two controllers act as one input, so a parent or sibling can assist without taking over entirely), and controller remapping managed through the Xbox Accessories app.

Nintendo Switch 2

System Settings → Accessibility includes enlarged text sizes, a bold text toggle, and Pan and Zoom (double-press the Home button to magnify the screen). Nintendo's accessibility suite is newer and less extensive than PlayStation's or Xbox's, so check directly for a specific game.

Checking accessibility before you buy

- PlayStation Store accessibility tags — over 50 tags across six categories: visual, audio, subtitles, controls, difficulty, and online communication
- Xbox storefront feature tags — narrated menus, input remapping, single-stick gameplay, and colour options
- The Accessible Games Initiative (AGI) — a cross-publisher standard adopted by Xbox, with PlayStation and Nintendo expected to follow
- Can I Play That (caniplaythat.com) — independent, detailed accessibility reviews written by disabled gamers themselves



HARDWARE AND SPECIALIST SUPPORT

Adaptive Controllers & Support

PS5 Access Controller

An official, self-contained controller with a large button ring and joystick, fully remappable, with ports to add extra switches. Designed to work well straight out of the box.

Xbox Adaptive Controller

Works more like a hub, with around 19 ports for connecting external switches, buttons, and joysticks, so it can be built out to match very specific needs. It also works on Windows PCs.

Switch: third-party options

Nintendo doesn't currently make an official adaptive controller. Third-party options, such as the HORI Flex, fill that gap for Switch households.

When you need more than settings

For more complex needs, specialist charities exist to help, entirely free of charge in most cases:

- **SpecialEffect** (specialeffect.org.uk) — assesses a child's specific needs directly and builds custom accessible gaming setups, including eye-gaze systems for children who cannot use their hands at all.
- **AbleGamers** (ablegamers.org) — provides equipment grants, accessibility consulting, and peer support. Works with families, not just individuals.

THE POINT WORTH REMEMBERING

Accessible gaming isn't a separate category of gaming. It's the same games, the same friendships, and the same fun, made reachable. Setting this up properly for a child who needs it deserves the same care as any of the safety steps elsewhere in this guide.



SIGNS TO NOTICE

Healthy Engagement, vs. When to Look Closer

Most gaming, even a lot of gaming, is a normal, healthy part of childhood and adolescence. The goal isn't to treat every long session as a warning sign. It's to notice patterns that genuinely differ from your child's normal behaviour.

Generally healthy signs

- Gaming alongside real-world friendships, not instead of them
- Willing to stop or pause when asked, even if reluctantly
- Talks about games and in-game friends openly, without secrecy
- Mood stays broadly stable whether or not they've been able to play

Patterns worth paying closer attention to

None of these alone is proof of a problem, but a combination, or a sudden change from your child's normal pattern, is worth a closer, calm conversation:

- Increasing secrecy specifically around gaming or who they're talking to
- Withdrawal from in-person friendships or family in favour of one particular online relationship
- Distress, anger, or anxiety that's disproportionate to being asked to stop playing
- Unexplained gifts, in-game currency, or money appearing, or unusual secrecy about spending
- Reluctance to let you see messages or chat logs they were previously happy to show you

IF SOMETHING FEELS GENUINELY WRONG

Trust your instinct over any checklist. If you're worried a child is being groomed or exploited through an online game, you can report it directly to CEOP, and the NSPCC Helpline can talk it through with you, including anonymously, even if you're not yet sure whether it's serious. You do not need to be certain before reaching out.



WHY GAMES ARE HARD TO STOP

Gaming and Emotional Regulation

Losing a match, getting stuck on a hard level, or being asked to stop mid-session can trigger real frustration or anger, and that's not a sign anything's wrong. It's a normal part of an engaging activity meeting a developing brain that's still learning to regulate itself.

Why games are built to keep you playing

Most games use a reward loop: points, levels, streaks, and notifications that deliver a small hit of satisfaction just often enough to make stopping feel harder than continuing. This isn't accidental, it's the same underlying principle behind slot machines and infinite social media feeds.

This means your child's difficulty stopping isn't a character flaw, it's the game working as designed. Naming this to your child directly hands them a piece of media literacy they can use themselves. A simple question like "what is it that makes you want to play just one more round?" often does more than a rule ever will.

A simple check-in habit

- **Before:** a quick "how are you feeling right now?"
- **During:** watch for a shift in tone, tension, or irritability, more useful than watching the clock
- **After:** "what was the best bit?" and "did anything frustrate you?", both questions, so it doesn't read as fault-finding

The question worth replacing entirely is "how long did you play?" on its own. Pair it with "how did you feel while you were playing, and how do you feel now?"

When emotions run high: a reset, not a shutdown

If a session ends with real frustration, the most useful thing isn't a lecture, it's a change of state. A short burst of movement, a walk around the block, kicking a ball in the garden, or stepping outside for a minute, helps a child's body come down from an activated state faster than sitting with the frustration indoors. This is a genuinely effective, low-effort way to help a child's nervous system reset, not a trick to make them forget what upset them.



KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

Having the Conversation

The single most protective thing you can do isn't a setting, it's making sure your child believes they can tell you if something online goes wrong, without immediately losing their device or your trust in them.

- **Ask about the game itself before asking about risk** — what do you like about it, who do you play with, what happened today. Genuine curiosity opens conversation; interrogation closes it.
- **Separate the behaviour from the punishment** — react to the situation first, and address any rule that was broken separately, and later. A child who expects to lose their console for confiding in you will stop confiding in you.
- **Revisit rules and settings as your child gets older** — controls set for an 8-year-old shouldn't still be the controls in place at 14 without a conversation about why.
- **Let your child teach you something about the game** — it rebalances the relationship, and you'll often learn more about how they actually use it than any setting will tell you.



THE UPSIDE, HONESTLY

What Gaming Gets Right

It's worth ending here, not as an afterthought, but because it's the part most guides skip. Gaming, done well, is a genuine social and developmental good, particularly for children who find other social spaces harder.

- Multiplayer games are a real venue for friendship, teamwork, and belonging, especially for children who are shy, neurodivergent, or find in-person social settings difficult
- Many games build genuine problem-solving, planning, and resilience, learning to fail, adapt, and try again in a low-stakes environment
- For isolated or socially anxious children specifically, structured, well-supported gaming can be a bridge into confidence and real-world connection, not a retreat from it
- For disabled children specifically, accessible gaming can be one of the few spaces where the game adapts to the child, rather than the other way around

The goal of this guide was never to make gaming feel like a threat to manage. It's to help you support something that, set up well, can be one of the healthiest parts of how your child connects with the world.



THE SHORT VERSION, BY STAGE

Quick Wins, By Age

Everything above applies whatever your child's age, but what actually matters most shifts as they get older.

Age	What matters most
Under 7	Focus on PEGI 3–7 titles and co-play rather than controls. Sitting with your child while they play teaches more than any setting.
7–11	Set up console-level controls properly now: spending limits, chat restricted to friends-only. Introduce the before/after emotional check-in as a normal habit, not a punishment.
12–15	Talk through PEGI 16 content descriptors together rather than just blocking by number. Start explaining reward loops directly, this is the age media literacy actually sticks.
16+	Shift from controls to conversation. Ask directly whether they notice a mood or sleep difference after long sessions, and treat their answer as data worth respecting, not a problem to fix for them.

AT ANY AGE

If your child has a disability that affects how they play, the accessibility settings and support in this guide apply just as much as the age-based guidance above, check them alongside whichever stage fits your child.



HELPLINES AND REPORTING

Where to Get Help

Verified as current for this edition. Keep these somewhere easy to find, not just in this guide.

Contact	Number / link	What it's for
NSPCC Helpline	0808 800 5000	For any adult worried about a child.
Childline	0800 1111	Free, confidential, for children and young people directly.
CEOP	ceop.police.uk	Report suspected grooming or online exploitation.
SpecialEffect	specialeffect.org.uk	Free, custom accessible gaming setups for disabled children.
AbleGamers	ablegamers.org	Equipment grants and accessibility support for gamers with disabilities.
Emergency	999	If a child is in immediate danger.

BEFORE YOU NEED IT

Agree with your child, in a calm moment, that if anything online ever feels wrong they can tell you without losing access to their games. That single agreement does more than any setting.

Prefer the interactive version? The full toolkit, with checklists you can tick off on your phone, is free at ifbgaming.com. If IFB Gaming's work is worth something to you, you can support it or partner with us from there too.



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Thanks for reading.

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ifbgaming.com

This guide was produced by John Adewole for IFB Gaming, a digital inclusion research and learning organisation and member of Good Things Foundation's National Digital Inclusion Network.

Sources: PEGI, NSPCC, UK Safer Internet Centre, PlayStation and Xbox accessibility documentation, Nintendo, AbleGamers, Can I Play That, and SpecialEffect.
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Accessible Text Edition — built with a real, searchable text layer, a logical reading order, and screen-reader-friendly structure.