

Supporting children and young people with care-experience online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with care-experience stay safe online.



Online Gaming

Gaming is a major part of children and young people's lives today and those with experience of living in care are no exception. They provide children and young people with entertainment, relationship building, learning and development opportunities. However, there are also risks to their safety, mental and physical health to consider.

What you need to know

Interacting with others online through multi-player games has become an integral part of many children and young people's lives including those with experience of living in care. Any game that has a sharing function or chats by voice or text function can expose children and young people to online harms such as cyberbullying, abuse and exploitation.

For many children and young people online gaming is a space to play and socialise. It can be used to maintain friendships and make new ones. It can be particularly important for children and young people who can find themselves more socially isolated from their peers due to their care experiences. Parents and carers need to be aware that groomers and abusers can use voice or text function in games to isolate gamers and break up their trusted relationships.

The benefits

Online gaming let children and young people connect, create and share with others which brings a range of benefits that can support their wellbeing, including:

- Playing, chatting, and co-operating with other players around the world which helps to develop social skills and digital citizenship
- Hand-eye coordination, listening, and problem-solving can improve

- Tools are available to help children and young people develop their own games or modifications for existing games, enabling creativity and learning. These games can be sold online generating a small income
- The immersive nature of most games gives children and young people the opportunity to escape reality and enjoy downtime. In some cases, it can be used to help children to de-stress
- Gaming and special interest groups are useful ways for care-experienced children and young people to find both a voice and a community in which they can participate. Such groups allow children and young people to decide if they share their care status or not

The risks

The behaviours / risks parents and carers should watch out for when it comes to gaming online.

Any child or young person from any background, can be at risk of online harm, but some are more susceptible to it than others. Children and young people with care-experience may be more at risk or exhibit the following behaviours:

Online abuse

- Online games often require 'in app' purchases of items, such as weapons or 'skins', before progressing to higher levels. This can affect children and young people with care-experience who have less access to funds and means of online payment. Groomers and predators can spot this limitation, either through the game not progressing or in chat, and will make the payment for, or offer gifts to the young person as part of the grooming process

- Groomers may encourage children and young people to talk to them through headphones to try and keep details of their conversation private and isolate the child or young person further. So it's always recommended that if a child is talking to friends through apps such as [Discord](#), it is done through speakers rather than a headset to stay on top of what is being shared

If a child or young person was placed in care due to maltreatment and neglect they may be emotionally vulnerable and therefore more at risk of [being groomed online or child sexual abuse](#).

Privacy concerns

The relative anonymity of gaming online can encourage children and young people to take risks and say or do things they may not do in the real world. Children and young people with care-experience may have differing social experiences and risk taking perspectives to their peers, making this an important consideration for this group when online gaming

Inappropriate content

- Many sites, online games and apps are designed with reward systems to encourage frequent, regular use. These can lead to excessive use and even [addiction](#), which can have a big impact on a child or young person's wellbeing
- [Games are age and content rated](#) but children and young people can access games by using a false date of birth if their account setup is unsupervised
- Gamer communities featuring video and [live streaming](#) activity such as [Twitch](#) are not age rated or restricted and a child or young person can easily watch inappropriate levels of behaviour and engage in unmoderated chats

Cyberbullying/Trolling

- The chat section in games is another form of unmoderated communication between the child, young person and their friends, family and strangers which can be used for abuse and cyberbullying
- A child or young person that is not so good at a game or has fewer 'extras' from in-app purchases can cause the team to fail which may lead to abuse, bullying and exclusion from the group, affecting their mental health

Physical and mental health

- Depending on the type of games being played many require a narrow focus of attention and children and young people fully immerse themselves in the game. Extended periods of gaming may have [negative effects on both physical and mental health](#)

Gambling

- [Loot boxes](#) offer random, unspecified reward in return for payment. Players pay for the loot box before they know what it contains, and if results are not what they wanted they can be drawn into continuing to pay for more loot boxes to try to get

the item they want. This is considered by many as a form of gambling and can lead young people into [gambling in other online and offline activities](#)

Cyber scams

- Findings from our [research](#) found that children and young people with care-experience are particularly susceptible to cyber scams. This is particularly acute within gaming because with the growth of in-game purchases in free-to-play games, fraudsters are increasingly looking to infiltrate games or create scams to steal data and money from unsuspecting gamers. According to [Action Fraud](#) Between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018, Action Fraud received 35 reports of Fortnite related fraud, with a total loss of £5,119 – an average of £146 per victim
- In addition to cyber scams children and young people with care experience are also more likely to be a victim of [cyber aggression](#). This is typically when aggression happens between people online as a one off or occasionally. At times it can be used as a way to bully, or manipulate and intimidate others. An example of this could be if a child is playing with friends and they are ridiculed for being a "noob" or a griefer (a bad intentioned player) may intentionally target other players to deliberately irritate and harass them to win a game

It is important to be aware that:

- Modern games often rely on 'team' roles and players require online access to participate, whether through Xbox, PlayStation, or mobile devices. Teams communicate via the chat section of the game and comments can have both positive and negative effects on children and young people
- Children and young people tend to see no boundaries between their life online and their life offline and often become victims online, through someone who knows them offline and is aware of their 'vulnerability'. In this way the perpetrator has the knowledge to manipulate them especially if they are experiencing vulnerabilities

Children and young people in your care may experience all forms of risk - content, contact, and conduct when gaming. Where their previous internet history and experiences have been unmanaged or unregulated, they may have already been exposed to these risks and see the activity as acceptable or as "banter".

The areas of risk explained:

Content – Being exposed to inappropriate or harmful content which may include bullying and abuse, or harmful topics (e.g. pornography, self-harm, etc)

Contact – Meeting strangers and being involved in high-risk relationships online

Conduct – Where a child behaves in a way that contributes to risky content or contact or is the recipient of harmful conduct online

The challenges

Harder to recognise 'real friends'

Children and young people in care may look for players in online games to provide stable contact and interaction (good or bad) in place of physical interaction. They may have learned not to trust caregiving adults, but can be won over by online contacts that do what they say they will do, give rewards, and say positive things.

Gaming includes watching live streams

Videos and live streams of gamer activity on sites like [YouTube](#) and [Twitch](#) show children and young people how to play games. They enjoy watching these players, who may be professionals, gaming at a higher level. If a child or young person is restricted from playing a game they will turn to these videos and live streams instead, partially negating the effect of not being allowed to play. Also as live streams may be unmoderated, they may be exposed to inappropriate language or content that could impact their wellbeing.

Sharing too much information

Children can also be tempted to 'overshare' information online, inadvertently or not, that can identify them, their status, or their carers. This may be through the content of their posts or images (school uniforms, homes, favourite scenes), the regular posting of their location, or through choice of identifiers such as usernames and gamer tags.

Once in the game it is common to use a screen name or gamer tag. For example, a username such as janedoe0904 may suggest their DOB as September 2004 making online identification simpler. It can be beneficial to disguise the username, though this may be telling a young person to be untruthful, so accompany this with an age appropriate discussion around security, privacy, and data protection.

Things to consider

Foster parents and carers should look out for behaviour changes to determine if a child or young person is experiencing an online harm (cyber scams, cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, online sexual abuse, online grooming, etc).

Here are some things to think about:

- Has their behaviour changed?
- Is their friendship group changing?
- Be involved from as early as possible.
Be positive about their online activity
- Show and share good skills and behaviour in your own online activity
- Talk early and often to encourage dialogue and make it natural

- Ensure they have a good support network
- Educate them on both risks and benefits of connections through gaming
- Empower and support them to make their own choices and be there if it goes wrong
- Get to know their previous gaming activity and history
- If they use their email address when signing up to things, ensure they understand privacy and safety rules
- Add internet activity and safety, including game playing, to their placement plan and care plan so that it is agreed by all involved with the child

Practical steps to help your child:

- Comply with Code of Practice
 - Understand and comply with your Fostering Service internet and social media guidelines or Code of Practice. Let your child know you have rules to follow too. (Your local social services and independent fostering agencies will have the appropriate internet guidance and training for carers together with codes of practice for carers and social workers)
- Create a [family agreement](#)
- Make use of built in parental controls
 - Use existing free parental controls and privacy settings on the apps and platforms they use to manage their safety and set clear boundaries to help them explore in a safer environment. For more information, take a look at our [Parental Controls](#) guides
- Learning about the games from organisations such as [Net Aware](#), [Taming Gaming](#), [Ask About Games](#) and [Common Sense Media](#) will give good insight into which games are appropriate for children or young people in your care
- If a child or a young person has experienced harmful content online, [report it](#)

Conversations to have

Developing an open honest non-judgemental relationship where children and young people with care-experience feel safe in discussing their issues is a cornerstone of harm prevention.

Check in with them

- Ask open questions and listen in full to what they are saying without assuming anything or overreacting. Be non-judgemental. Some kids may expect that you will react badly to what they are saying so showing them that you can listen and respond calmly and supportively will be beneficial

- Ask them about who they engage with on online games and apps such as messaging and live streaming. Children and young people with care-experience often respond positively to gifts such as posting lots of likes or hearts and receiving 'cheats' or 'in app purchases' in games which generate trust. It can be difficult to explain to a young person that the gifter may have ulterior motives, unless this is part of an ongoing dialogue around access and use. Strangers in chat rooms and games are still strangers, no matter how much contact there is

Have ongoing conversations about privacy

- Having ongoing conversations around privacy (not to give out personal information) and data privacy (what 'free' apps and games take from us in return) can limit risks but appropriate settings in parental controls can also help. Regular checking of game and app privacy settings is important

Ask them about their digital life

- Discuss their online activity to clarify how they are using a game or platform therefore helping you to manage any feedback or comments they receive

Discuss screen time management

- When face to face contact is restricted, contact over screens may be the best way for children and young people to maintain their peer relationships. Explaining the difference between 'passive' consumption i.e. video or TV, and 'active' consumption i.e. education, gaming, video calls, can lead to more balanced use
- Even though the excessive use of screens may be hard to agree on with so much focus on use of technology, try to agree to certain management and controls. Such as switching off Wi-Fi and handheld devices at prescribed time (one hour before bedtime is recommended) or allowing a certain number of hours per day [Establishing patterns of activity](#) such as 20 minutes screen time (about the length of a Fortnite: Battle Royale match) followed by looking for at least 20 seconds at something at [least 20 metres away](#). It can be useful and give the child or young person a sense of control and involvement in their own self-care when online.
- If they use screens at night, ensure [blue light filter settings](#) is switched as it's less harmful than the normal screen brightness



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