
A Guide to Parent/Guardian Safety Settings of Online Games and Platforms

Project Lead: Dr Anna Lavis

Project Co-Researchers: Rosina Pendrous, Dr James Birchwood

Date: June 2023

The Importance of Children's Online Safety

Many children now have access to a range of digital devices and platforms. Ofcom is the UK's communications regulator and their recent report (2023) suggested that some of the most popular online activities among children are watching videos, playing video games, and using platforms to communicate by sending messages or making video/voice calls.

Although the report showed age differences in the extent and type of digital activities among children of primary school age, it suggested that of 3–4-year-olds, 70% play online/video games, 92% watch videos (87% on YouTube), and 48% use apps to send or receive messages from family and friends. In the 5–7-year-old age group, 93% watch videos, 59% use apps to send or receive messages from family and friends and 89% play online/video games, with Roblox reported as the most popular game. Amongst 8–11-year-olds, 96% watch videos, 63% use social media, and 67% play games online.

But, not enough attention has been paid, in either policy or research, to what primary school-aged children do and see online and its effect on them in the short and long-term. There is also very little known about the experiences of this younger age group when online gaming.

So, we did a research study that aimed to understand what children aged 7 to 11 do and see online, including on social media and during gaming. We conducted focus groups (a type of group interview) with children in years 3 and 4, and 5 and 6, in the West Midlands and in London. We wanted to hear about children's experiences in their own words and understand what content and experiences, if any, they found distressing and/or frightening.

This research was funded by the QR Policy Fund and the Institute for Mental Health, University of Birmingham.

The Aim of this Guide

It can be challenging to know where to start when setting the parent/guardian controls for your child's screen time. This can be especially difficult because parent/guardian settings apply across devices and platforms: you might have a specific device which has parental controls, but when using the device, you might also have a game which has its own parental controls. Plus, each game and device may have different parent/guardian settings. Therefore, we will:

- Summarise the parent/guardian settings of the online games, platforms, and devices that our research found to be the most popular among primary school children aged 7-11. To note - some of the games and platforms listed are not aimed at this age group but are included here because they were discussed by the children themselves.
- Outline the UK guidelines on age ratings for specific video and online games, such as the PEGI age guidelines, as well as noting key points to be aware of for each game based on our own research.
- Provide details of further guidance from recognised organisations to aid you, as a parent/guardian, family member, or teacher, keep children safe online.

Popular Devices and Cloud Accounts

Devices

Most devices have parent/guardian settings that allow you to control which apps and browsers are accessible to children, control in-app purchasing and downloads, filter inappropriate content and media, limit sharing data like location, and set screen timers. These can be used in combination with parental settings for specific apps and games that your child might access. If you are in doubt, it is best to apply settings to both.

Apple iDevices (iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch)

For guidance on Apple iDevices, see here: <https://support.apple.com/en-gb/HT201304#:~:text=Follow%20these%20steps%3A-Go%20to%20Settings%20and%20tap%20Screen%20Time,Adult%20Websites%20or%20Allowed%20Websites.>

Android Devices

For guidance on Android Devices (e.g., Samsung, Motorola, Nokia phones), see here: <https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/smartphones-and-other-devices/android-tablet/>

Cloud Accounts

There are also settings within cloud servers designed to allow parental controls across a range of devices, internet browsers, and consoles, as part of 'family' group accounts. In this way, specific members of the family can be added to the group so that their settings can then be controlled and monitored by a parent or guardian.

Microsoft Family

Microsoft Family allows parents/guardians to manage payments through Xbox (but not PlayStation), set screentime limits, add content filters on Microsoft browsers (Microsoft Edge), and receive activity reports. However, some features come with a cost to set up Microsoft Family.

<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/account-billing/getting-started-with-microsoft-family-safety-b6280c9d-38d7-82ff-0e4f-a6cb7e659344>

Google Family Link and Google Play

Similarly, Google Link allows parents or guardians to manage controls on Google-specific browsers, apps on Google Play, locate Android devices, and set up their child's Google account.

https://support.google.com/families/topic/7336731?hl=en&ref_topic=6149867&sjid=14064559595937133023-EU

Online Video Games

Minimum Age Requirements

In the UK, video games are typically rated according to the PEGI guidelines. The guidelines state that games should not be played by anyone under the age of the following ratings: 3, 7, 12, ! (parental guidance advisory), 16, or 18+, for reasons related to the game's content.

According to PEGI guidelines, in-game purchases can occur in all games labelled 3+.

 www.pegi.info	PEGI 3 Suitable for everyone but you might see very mild cartoon violence.
 www.pegi.info	PEGI 7 The same as above but may also have scary looking characters. Violence between vehicles may also be seen, for example cars crashing into each other.
 www.pegi.info	PEGI 12 May contain unrealistic more violence towards humans or realistic violence towards fantasy characters such as dragons or trolls. May also contain mild swearing and naughty jokes.
 www.pegi.info	Parental Guidance This rating only appears on apps. It warns you that these apps are very big and could contain lots of different things. Examples include Instagram and Netflix.
 www.pegi.info	PEGI 16 May contain more realistic violence towards humans and strong bad language. It might show love scenes and people not wearing clothes. There may be people taking illegal drugs or drinking alcohol and smoking.
 www.pegi.info	PEGI 18 The same as above but may contain very strong violence, as well as other things that are only suitable for adults.

Check a game's age rating here: <https://videostandards.org.uk/RatingBoard/games>


Games Rating Authority Tools for Parents:


<https://videostandards.org.uk/MzCms/ContentImage.ashx?cpath=000%5c000%5c969%5c584%5cPrimaryAgeRatingSheet.pdf>


Popular Games

When your child or teenager wants to engage with a new game or social media platform, it is very important that they enter their correct date of birth when setting up their user account so that age restrictions are applied automatically to their profile.

What follows is a list of the parent/guardian control options of popular games and platforms to help keep your child safe online.

	Features	Parent/Guardian Control Options	Age Rating
<p>Roblox</p> <p>Roblox is an online-only platform which allows players to create and play a range of user-generated games.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free-to-play but contains in-app purchases and in-game currency called 'Robux'. Players can create avatars, chat with friends, and play a range of games. 	<p>For users with accounts under 13, Roblox, by default, has more restrictive settings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrict/disable chat Customise friends list <p>Parental controls also include a protected 4-code pin to make changes.</p> <p>In 'Settings', you can also restrict access to only age-appropriate games, and set a monthly limit on how much can be spent on Robux.</p> <p>There is also the option to report and block other players.</p>	 <p>(Parental Guidance Recommended)</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Loot boxes Trust trades Hacking Being contacted by strangers through the game</p>	<p>Link to Account Restriction Settings</p>

<p>Minecraft</p> <p>Minecraft is an online or video game which allows players to build their own environment.</p> <p>The game has two modes: offline (play alone) and online (play with others via public servers).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free to play but contains optional subscriptions and in-game purchases. • There are single-player and multi-player modes. • Minecraft has different servers that players can join. • Players can chat with other players, though this can be disabled in parental settings. 	<p>Parental settings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add, mute, block or report players in-game • Access family-friendly servers • Customise or turn off in-game chat • Set up realms for your child and their friends • Disable multiplayer • Enable the profanity filter • Report a user <p>As Minecraft can be played on multiple devices, such as Xbox or PS4, these devices usually have specific parental settings that can be applied over the games.</p>	 <p>The image shows the PEGI 7 rating logo, which consists of a large white number '7' on a green background, with 'TM' in the top right corner. Below the green box is a black box containing the text 'www.pegi.info' in white.</p>
--	--	---	--

<p>Fortnite</p> <p>Fortnite is a free online multiplayer game with three main game options: compete in Battle Royale, collaborate to create your private island in Creative, or quest in Save the World.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free to play but contains optional subscriptions and in-game purchases. • There are single-player and multi-player modes. • Involves action, fighting, weapons, zombie-like creatures, and vehicles. 	<p>Parental settings via a parental controls PIN include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn off or turn on manage purchasing permissions • Set an age rating to limit access to new games • Filter mature language • Track playtime • Customise or turn off in-game text and voice chat • Report another user 	 <p>The image shows the PEGI 12 rating logo, which consists of a yellow square with the number '12' in white, and a black bar below it with the text 'www.pegi.info' in white.</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Like Roblox, there are risks of hacking.</p>	<p>https://www.epicgames.com/site/en-US/parental-controls</p>

Popular Platforms

When your child or teen wants to engage with a new game or social media platform, it is very important that they enter their correct date of birth when setting up their user account so that age restrictions are applied automatically to their profile.

<p>YouTube (Kids)</p> <p>YouTube Kids is a separate platform to YouTube that is specifically designed for children up to age 12.</p>	<p>Watch videos designed for kids. Many children also report watching videos of playing games online.</p> <p>“Nursery School” Mode: Ages <4</p> <p>“Younger” Mode: Ages 5-8</p> <p>“Older” Mode: Ages 9-12+</p>	<p>With YouTube Kids, the parent holds the account that can only be changed with a password known to the parent only.</p> <p>Controls include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting a timer to limit excessive use • Review viewing history to see what your child has watched • Block a video or an entire channel to prevent access • Report videos so that YouTube can review and remove content 	<p>0-12+</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Although this is a much safer option than allowing your child onto YouTube, there is still a need to keep an eye on the content your child is accessing, and what the algorithm suggests to them. Also watch out for discussions of hacking and how-to hack.</p>	<p>https://www.youtube.com/kids/parent-resources/</p>

<p>YouTube</p>	<p>Watch videos designed for older children and adults.</p> <p>Parental settings are only applicable for YouTube Kids – so you will not be able to control what your kids watch/do on YouTube versus YouTube Kids.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disable quick purchase, • Manage privacy settings. • Manage Ads in Ad Centre. 	<p>13+</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Some content on YouTube is rated 18+ which would require further age verification (e.g., adverts).</p> <p>Children in our study described seeing inappropriate or frightening content on YouTube. The algorithm will suggest content based on previous watches by users who may be others in the household.</p> <p>Also be aware of videos created to scare children which begin as harmless cartoons and then cut to violent or inappropriate content.</p>	<p>https://www.youtube.com/account</p>

<p>TikTok</p> <p>TikTok is a social media platform in which users share video content.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share and watch video content • Connect with friends • Direct message users (16+) • Host live videos (18+) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up "Family Pairing" to manage a teen's account • Report content on TikTok (e.g., sound, video, account) • Enable "restricted mode" to limit exposure to content not suitable for all 	<p>13+</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Fraudulent messages</p> <p>Graphic or violent content, or that described by the children in our study as "weird," "scary" or "rude"</p> <p>Challenges that can be very dangerous</p>	<p>https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en/guardians-guide/</p>
<p>WhatsApp</p> <p>WhatsApp is a smartphone app or web app that allows text, phone and video calls with anyone who has your phone number.</p>	<p>One-to-one or group private messaging with friends and family, or anyone who has your phone number.</p> <p>WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted so texts cannot be read by anyone except the account owner.</p>	<p>Parental settings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block and report a user • Manage privacy settings • Disable live location 	<p>13+</p>

	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Children sharing inappropriate information, scams, graphic, violent or pornographic in friendship WhatsApp groups.</p>	<p>https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/?gad=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw0tKiBhC6ARIsAAOXutmK_AhcCGC--gEPFmTk6lpgA111q3Gee-dZCgDbNdS5XNM6QLx_nUYaAji-EALw_wcB</p>
<p>Snapchat</p> <p>Snapchat is a messaging system in which users communicate mostly via images or videos as well as text chat.</p>	<p>One-to-one and group messaging by text and by photo (typically photo). This can be private (i.e., with only a friends list) and public (i.e., with anyone).</p> <p>Location sharing to see where members on your friends list are.</p>	<p>Parental settings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family centre to monitor your child’s use of Snapchat • Ghost mode • Limit contact from adults • Contact settings • Report a user 	<p>13+</p>
	<p>To be especially aware of:</p>	<p>Location sharing with people unknown to the child. Receiving messages/images from non-friends, ie strangers.</p>	<p>https://values.snap.com/en-GB/safety/family-center</p>

More Resources for Parents/Guardians, Family Members and School Staff

Resources for Parents/Guardians and Other Family Members

- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>
- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers>
- <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/nkvbqk20/online-safety-updated-feb-2020.pdf>
- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/grandparents>

Resources for Young People

- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/young-people/resources-for-11-19s>
- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/young-people>

Resources for Teachers and School Staff

- <https://www.internetmatters.org/schools-esafety/>
- <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/safer-internet-resources>
- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/teachers-and-school-staff>

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

