Playing electronic games (gaming) is popular in Australia, where 92 per cent of households have electronic games. Electronic gaming involves interaction with a device to control visual feedback for entertainment.

The types of devices used to play these games are commonly called ‘platforms’ and they include: personal computers; Ipad; video game consoles such as the PS3, Xbox360 and Wii; and mobile handheld devices such as smartphones, tablets, the Nintendo DS, Gameboy and Ipods.

Gaming is big business with an estimated global sales market of $68 billion in 2012. Despite a reduction in sales compared to the previous year, Australians spent close to $1.2 billion on products related to games in 2012. The fastest growing area of gaming involves smartphones.

This tipsheet provides parents with information regarding:

- Talking to your child about gaming
- How to choose appropriate games
- Parental controls
- Cyber safety
- Possible benefits of gaming
- Overcoming the possible physical harms
- Overcoming the possible psychological/emotional harms.

Talk about it

Gaming presents an opportunity to speak with your children about something that interests them. Children themselves are often best placed to let you know what games they enjoy, so take the time to recognise and respect your child’s perspective on games. Showing an interest in their gaming may start a conversation that better informs you about whether a game really is appropriate. You could ask:

- Why do they like the game?
- What is challenging about the game?
- What their friends are playing?

Some parents find it difficult to talk about the games their children like because the language, concepts and context can be incomprehensible to anyone who is not familiar with the game.

Taking an interest and encouraging children to explain what is going on can help you to appreciate the attraction of the game and what might be important in managing gaming issues of concern.
It is important to establish and agree on the rules for gaming in your family, like:

- which games are appropriate
- when and how long games can be played
- playing online – or not
- who your child can play games with and/or against
- the importance of safety, particularly if playing online.

You are more likely to get cooperation around these rules if your child is involved in creating them. Allowing time to reach a ‘save point’ or to conclude a section of the game before turning off respects the investment your child has in the game. This can be as simple as a five-minute warning prior to putting the game away in time for dinner.

At the end of the day, you are the parent and have the authority to make and enforce the rules concerning play. However if your child helps to create these boundaries, the outcome is likely to be more positive for both of you and will help establish a trend of agreeing on family rules.

Choosing appropriate games

Different games are appropriate at different stages of a child’s development. The best way to judge a game is to play it yourself, which will enable you to have an informed position about the appropriateness of a game. If the game is for more than one player you could join in with your child. You may find that you enjoy the game as much as your children, but remember to be a good role model for your children regarding the games you play! If you don’t play the game yourself, at least go through a detailed description of the game profile, rather than basing your decision solely on the genre or the classification rating. If you are not sure, be conservative about what you allow.

Talking to other parents and older children about games that are popular or that your child plays is a great way to learn more about them. Additionally, there are lots of websites and television programs that provide reviews of games, like ABC2’s ‘Good Game’ and ‘Good Game Spawn Point’ (which is specifically for younger children).

Unsupervised play can be risky and it is important to be aware of the games your children are playing, especially if the game involves playing in an online environment.
Parental controls

Many gaming devices include online elements and should be considered in the same way you might consider a computer used to visit online sites such as Facebook. This opens up the opportunity for shared gaming, but you need to be aware of the potential for your child to be exposed to inappropriate people and/or content.

Most gaming devices have parental controls which can be used to set limits on gameplay. These can limit the amount of time spent playing, prevent games with certain classifications from being played or restrict the purchase of apps or in-game purchases. In this way the settings on your device (iPad, tablet, Wii, etc) can reinforce agreed family rules and protect children from inappropriate games.

Key things to remember about parental controls:

• they will, most likely, not be automatically switched on
• generally, you can access the parental control through the system settings on the device
• instructions on how to set parental controls can be found in the device’s manual or type ‘parental controls’ and the name of the system (e.g. parental controls xbox) into an internet search engine
• ThinkUKnow website has a useful guide on how to use parental settings for consoles at http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/site/parent_controls_gaming.asp
• use strong passwords to set the parental controls with a range of letters (upper and lower case), numbers and symbols.

Classifications

When deciding whether a game is suitable for children, parents can check the Australian Classification Board ratings at www.classification.gov.au. Most classification systems tend to be more tolerant of violent content than of sexual content. A summary of the classifications includes:

Advisory categories for films and computer games, where no legal restrictions apply:

• **G** – General – is suitable for everyone
• **PG** – Parental Guidance – impact should be no higher than mild, but may contain content that children find confusing or upsetting
• **M** – Mature – content of a moderate impact and is recommended for ages 15 years and over.

Restricted categories for films and computer games, where legal restrictions apply:

• **MA15+** – Mature Accompanied – content is strong in impact (may contain sex scenes and drug use) and is legally restricted to persons 15 years and over
• **R18+** – Restricted – content is high in impact (may contain sex scenes and drug use) and is restricted to adults.

Note – **R18+** is a new rating for games that came into effect on 1 January 2013.
Cyber safety

- Given the online component of many games, ‘cyber safety’ needs to be considered. Some strategies to help protect your children and others include:
  - blocking and/or reporting cyberbullies to game moderators or server hosts
  - being aware that people may be pretending to be much younger online
  - having your child use an alias that does not identify them (e.g. no details of age, gender, location)
  - keeping the web-cam turned off
  - not uploading photos or, at least, taking the geotagging setting off when taking photos which can provide the location where the photo was taken (e.g. the family home)
  - regularly reinforcing key cyber safety messages regarding strong passwords, no sharing of personal details in open forums, limiting online conversation to the game being played, and so on.

- If you allow children to play games that involve interactions with other players online, teach them to be respectful and courteous online. Teach them that, unfortunately, some people might be rude, bad sports and not tell the truth online.

- Deciding whether to allow a child to play online games is similar to other everyday parenting decisions. For example, when deciding whether a child can walk to school by themselves, you determine if they are ready, and if so, you teach them how to recognise danger and how to respond safely. The decision about whether a child is allowed to play online games is similar in that a decision is made which takes into account whether a child can recognise and safely manage potential risk and then teaching them how to remain safe.

- A tipsheet for parents on cyber safety is also available from the Department’s website.

Effects of Electronic Gaming on Children

Playing electronic games appears to have an impact on a child’s developing brain. This is unsurprising as a range of everyday activities such as learning to read or playing a musical instrument also have an impact. The impact of playing games can be both positive and negative.

Possible benefits of gaming

A range of benefits are associated with electronic games for children including development of:

- improved hand-eye coordination and visual-motor skills, such as resistance to distraction, sensitivity to information in the peripheral vision and ability to count briefly-presented objects

- problem solving and logic skills that children develop to find creative ways to solve puzzles, including:
  - being able to assess, take risks and apply novel strategies without fear of looking silly in case those strategies do not work
  - applying lessons learned in games to studies such as understanding real life physics from games (e.g. constructing or demolishing buildings).

- planning and resource management skills when limited items must be used to maximum effect to achieve an objective

- ability to analyse and prioritise objectives, and multi-task a range of activities to achieve those objectives. In addition players may be compelled to be flexible and reconsider their choices (which can be done without losing face)

- a broader range of experiences, concepts and perceptions where games have educational content.
Within the classroom, technology is increasingly being used to improve learning and in 2011 the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development undertook research into ‘Games-based Learning’. Their findings were that, as long as games were embedded in the curriculum and supported by directed learning principles and goals, they were a good way of improving learning for students which:

- empowered students to develop essential learning skills such as problem solving and decision making
- increased collaborative learning between students
- provided learning opportunities that aligned with real life experiences
- led to a significant increase in motivation, confidence, greater self-responsibility and commitment from students to their learning.

Some games have a strong underlying narrative. These tales may be epic, compelling or just downright bizarre, where a player influences a complex story through choices and actions. Many games present characters and tales from novels and movies, which can encourage further reading.

While a number of games present stereotypical characters, others make social commentary or broaden perceptions and experiences.

However like any pastime there are potential risks that need to be managed so that safe and appropriate game play does not become something that is harmful and impacts on players’ real lives.

Types of games

While games can involve playing against the game itself, a key element of modern games is playing cooperatively with and/or against other people through:

- a multiplayer mode against another player or players in the same room (a LAN or local area network), or multiplayer online role-playing games with various external players.

Games can be classified according to specific video game genres, including:

- Action – typically requires quick reflexes and good spatial awareness to act in a virtual environment (such as a war). This can include first-person shooter games where the player moves through the environment eliminating enemies
- Adventure – requires the exploration of an environment and solving puzzles to progress rather than simply becoming faster and more adept at specific actions
- Role playing – involves developing and taking the role of a character (an ‘avatar’) that typically journeys through a challenging environment
- Simulation – involves a simulation of ‘real life’ experiences such as driving a car, piloting a plane or creating a functioning city complete with schools, services and utilities
- Strategy – requires critical thinking about choices and resource management during a game to achieve objectives
- Movement games – rather than using standard controllers, players’ real life movements are replicated in gameplay (via a motion capture camera or motion sensitive controller), for example to play tennis or hit a golf ball across a course
- Electronic versions of board games, card games, word games and similar activities.
Overcoming the possible physical harms

A strong element of games is that they involve being sedentary in front of a screen, which can have a negative impact on children’s physical development and wellbeing, contributing to poor fitness and gross motor skills, raised cholesterol, lack of vitamin D, type 2 diabetes and being overweight. Key strategies to reduce these negative impacts include:

• being aware of how much screen time your child is getting each day
• limiting sedentary leisure screen time to two hours a day is a government recommendation
• schedule a break every 30 minutes or so
• encouraging at least as much physical activity as game activity
• encouraging swapping sedentary games for active movement games. But always ensure that the playing area is a safe zone within which to move safely and avoid injuries from hitting furniture or other people
• children, like anyone, can reduce the risk of soreness or injury when playing active games by warming up before playing and by building up their fitness before playing for longer or at higher levels of intensity.

In order to reduce any friction between you and your child however, it is important to be aware that the ‘requirements’ of some games are so immersive that players may feel they are unable to take a break. For example there might be a lack of game ‘save points’ or if your child is playing cooperatively online with others it may be difficult for them to leave the game without letting the side down. You wouldn’t take your child off the cricket pitch because they had been in the sun for 30 minutes.

Instead, you would ensure they had long sleeves, a hat, sunblock and plenty of water. Similarly, gamers can reduce the harm from longer playing times by doing frequent wrist, leg and upper body stretches; taking their eyes off the screen and focusing into the distance; and standing up from time to time.

Leaving a cooperatively played game at a critical point, without sufficient warning, may have dire consequences in the game and may lead to exclusion of your child from future cooperative games. Be flexible, as children’s investment in games is important to them!

Other strategies to help reduce the negative impacts of game playing include:

• sitting at least one metre from the screen
• playing games in a well-lit room and reducing the brightness of the screen
• not playing games when feeling tired
• resting eyes by focusing into the distance every 20 minutes
• avoiding problems with muscles, bones and joints (especially hands, shoulders, neck and the back) by not binge gaming (i.e. playing for long periods of time) and by stretching wrists and fingers often. A good quality keyboard and mouse should be used to reduce strain and a comfortable chair to help maintain good posture is important
• watching out for electrical and trip hazards caused by using electrical devices.

It may be challenging to implement these strategies, however discussing and agreeing with children on appropriate rules will help them self-regulate their use of games and they will prefer that to a total ban on playing games!
Overcoming the possible psychological/emotional harms

Like many things in life, moderation is the key. While occasional exposure to age-appropriate screen content can be part of a generally healthy lifestyle, exposure to inappropriate content can damage children. Inappropriate media (for example, violent or sexualised content) has a negative effect. Children can assume distorted concepts about themselves, affecting self-esteem and the development of a healthy body image. They may also develop an unhealthy or distorted understanding of social norms, accepted behaviours and potential outcomes of action.

Helping children self-regulate (i.e. to recognise for themselves what is good for them and what is not, and to respond accordingly) can be very important to a child’s development. As a result, some key strategies for parents may include:

- educating children about media effects generally, and about game effects specifically, so children can learn to make informed choices
- helping children limit the amount of time spent playing games
- encouraging children to play pro-social and educational games rather than violent games
- keeping gaming devices in areas that are easy to supervise, particularly handheld mobile devices, and not in a child’s bedroom. This is especially important as many game systems are Wi-Fi enabled, allowing access to the internet in any part of the house or out in the community where Wi-Fi is accessible
- understanding that excessive playing of games can tire children and distract them, leading to poor school performance, health, posture and social maturity
- being aware that some games have negative themes including violence, present racial or gender stereotypes, and promote a range of anti-social behaviours
- being aware that the negative effects of violent games are increased when violence in a game lacks consequences or results in a reward, and is used to exact justice and punish
- being aware that violence often increases as games progress
- allow children at least one hour of ‘screen free’ time just before bed, and for under two-year-olds, no screen time at all. There should not be any screens in children’s bedrooms.

It is estimated that about 9.5 million Australians play electronic games. Their average age is 32 and, while most are 18 years or older, 94 per cent of children aged 6–15 years engage with games. Despite stereotypes to the contrary, almost half of all gamers are female and the percentage is increasing.
Useful resources

- ABC2 television – ‘Good Game’ and ‘Good Game Spawn Point’
- ‘Common Sense Media’
  www.commonsense.org
- Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)
  www.esrb.org
- Growing up fast and furious : reviewing the impacts of violent and sexualised media on children / editors: Wayne Warburton and Danya Braunstein (2012)
- ‘Stop, think, connect’
  www.staysafeonline.org
- Parenting WA Cybersafety Guide at
- ThinkUKnow www.thinkuknow.org.au/site/parent_controls_gaming.asp

Parenting WA
The Department of Local Government and Communities’ Parenting WA offers free information and support to parents, carers, grandparents and families with children from pre-birth to 18 years of age. Services include:

- Parenting WA telephone line offering 24/7 information and support to parents and carers.
- Local parenting coordinators who can support and advise parents and carers.
- Parenting WA library offering a range of books and DVDs.
- Parenting WA courses guide listing parenting courses available each term.

Phone: 1800 654 432
Website: www.communities.wa.gov.au
www.facebook.com/ParentingWA

Reminders

Before purchasing, check a game’s classification rating and take the time to check the content yourself. Read game reviews and check rating/content summaries on websites such as the Entertainment Software Rating Board at www.esrb.org.

Get children to seek permission before downloading anything. Devices can be set to control uploads and downloads.

Aim for the use of video games that are age-appropriate, safe, fun and often educational, with time limits to ensure moderate usage.

Encourage children to play games as part of a group rather than as a solitary activity. This will lead to children talking and working together.

Play games with your children, the cost of an extra controller is a good investment for interaction, especially when children can be leaders in teaching you how to play.

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1 In this information sheet, the terms ‘games’ and ‘gaming’ are used to cover all forms of electronic games, including video games, online games, computer games and games on phones or other mobile devices. A number of similar terms are used, such as ‘e-gaming’.  
2 http://www.igea.net/2013/02/australian-video-games-industry-records-1-161-billion-sales-in-2012/  
3 http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/06/18/us-videogames-idUSN1840038320080618?pageNumber=1&virtuaiBrandChannel=0  
5 http://www.newzoo.com/infographics/infographic-2012-australia/  

This guide uses ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘they’ in turn to refer to children and young people. Change to suit your child’s sex.

This publication is available on request in other formats to assist people with special needs.

Calls to a 1800 number from a standard landline telephone are free to the caller. Calls from a mobile may be charged at a time rate.