e-Safety for Parents

Video Games

Welcome to the new edition of the Parents Newsletter.

Finally, it seems as if we are starting to get some warm and sunny weather. But, if your kids are anything like mine were when they were young, the thrill of games is far more appealing than that strange yellow thing in the sky.

Video games have changed radically in the last 20 years, which can present an issue to many parents who may not understand or appreciate the content contained within them.

By the way, if you're on Facebook, I've opened up a new page. Come and say hello, the link is at the bottom of this page.

Alan Mackenzie

25 years ago, video games were designed for one audience – children. But things have moved on quite radically since then.

Games like Super Mario, Sonic and even arcade games like Pac-man were fun, simple and child-friendly. Then in the mid 1990's this changed when a game called Mortal Kombat was released – a game which, although not the first inappropriate game, was certainly the first to kick off a debate which still rumbles on today.

Mortal Kombat was a fighting game which, for the first time, showed blood coming from your opponent when you hit them. It also had a special move at the end of each match where you could kill your opponent in an extremely graphic manner – a move called a 'Fatality'. It caused so much controversy that the developers decided to remove the blood from the game on its release (although it was possible to re-activate the blood if you knew the cheat code). It marked the first time when games were no longer developed for children and paved the way for many more controversial titles to be released which dealt with the 'real' adult world rather than the fantasy worlds we had been used to.

e-safety adviser

Fast forward to now

Now, games such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA), Call of Duty (COD) and Saint's Row (to name a few) are getting released at regular intervals; games are no longer just about running around collecting gold coins or rings.

Games these days deal with incredibly complex social and political issues such as war, terrorism, human trafficking, rape, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, and can also be seen to promote incredibly sexist views towards women - many characters refer to women using derogatory terms, which we won't go into here, and see them as objects.

Game developers also tend to paint any female character as 'eye candy' who seem to wear less and less clothes as the years roll by.

Role models in video games are no longer hero's like Mario or Link (the hero in Zelda), but individuals who glamorise law breaking, are morally ambiguous and settle their differences through violence and terror, using language which would make even the hardiest of parents shudder at the thought of their children hearing.

Games are not bad; it's about choosing the right games

While we may not agree with the content in all video games, as parents we have to remember that games are no longer just for children. Games are designed for adults, discussing adult themes in a very adult way. To help you navigate this already complex world, there is a system in place to allow you to make an informed decision – PEGI.

If you're unsure if a game is appropriate or not, all you need to do is walk in the shop, grab the game and check out the guidance. If it says 18, it's for adults! Just view the rating the same as you would for a film. It's also worth remembering that if they are playing an 18 rated game online, they WILL be playing with other adults who will talk about things in a way which is not appropriate for your child to hear. We have to remember that adults buy these games expecting other adults to be the only players and some can find it frustrating to find young children in their world.

If you're still not sure whether or not the game is appropriate, even with the rating to help, try looking on YouTube for videos showing the game being played. This can be a great way to familiarise yourself with the virtual world they want to play in before they get a chance to experience it.

Safe as Sam

There are negatives

Online gaming can generally be a positive and fun experience for gamers, with numerous positives such as improving problem-solving skills, encouraging teamwork as well as being incredibly enjoyable. There are negative aspects of gaming, however, which should also be mentioned, especially in relation to violent and inappropriate video games.

Excessive gaming, especially late night gaming, can affect concentration levels during the school day as children can be overly tired and irritable. It can also make it more difficult for them to settle at night, keeping their brain active when they are trying to get to sleep. It's also important to encourage frequent breaks for them so they do not remain sat in the same position. for too long.

Violent and adult video games can desensitise children to violent behaviour. This can then translate to inappropriate play in school and with their friends in real life. Studies have found that some individuals who play violent games exhibit increased aggression.

The blurring of fantasy and reality - many games are set in the 'real world' with many characters in games committing acts of crime or violence with a blatant disregard for human life and laws of the land which they may come to see as normal behaviour in real life. It can also promote very negative views of women, including violence towards women being seen as 'normal'. Children may also attempt to recreate situations they have seen – a teenager described as a 'straight A student' attempted to rob a bank in a manner he had actively experienced in GTA

Stay in Control

With the best will in the world, even if you say no, your children may borrow games from their friends to play at home or play round their friend's house.

Games consoles are also more likely to end up in bedrooms than living rooms which will keep their virtual world hidden from you. To keep you in control of the games they are playing, try these top tips:

- It isn't really practical these days, but if possible (particularly for younger players) keep the console in a family friendly room. This allows you to keep an eye on who they are playing with, the content within the game as well as helping you to learn more about the games they play or enjoy playing.
- Use parental controls – all consoles, as well as some tablet devices, allow you to set a maximum PEGI rating to stop them playing inappropriate games
- Remember that games consoles allow you to play online with strangers, ask them who they play games with and how they know them – make sure they aren't giving away too much information about themselves while playing with 'friends'
- Ensure that before your child plays any games online, they know how to 'block' individuals who may cause them problems. This is their front line of defence against anyone who may wish to spoil their fun. Get them to show you how to do it before you let them loose!
- Make sure they understand when to report someone and also understand that they could be reported if they break the rules.
- Encourage them to take breaks every hour or so (parental controls can force this to happen, even showing a timer so they know how long they have left).

Playing games with your friends can be such a positive and enjoyable experience, some games can be educational (Minecraft), teaching appropriate moral values and inspiring the creative genius within, others are simply brilliant, silly fun. Providing we ensure the games are appropriate, we should let children enjoy experiencing these hugely appealing virtual playgrounds while still ensuring that we, the parents, can keep an ever watchful eye on what kind of worlds they are visiting.

Useful sites:

Pegi.info
Your source of information on the body which rates video games.

Commonsensemedia.org
A website which rates many of the films, books and games which your children may be playing. It is an American site so the ratings used may appear different.