

Understanding Online Games for Kids

Author : Cat

Date : February 21, 2017



When I think of computer games as a kid, I have fond memories of playing [Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?](#) and I still remember spending holiday money on [Super Mario Bros 3](#) for my Nintendo. When I got older, first person shooter games like [Duke Nukem](#) and simulations like [The Sims](#) hit the scene. Though variations of these games abound, there is one huge difference: the internet.

If playing games alone was fun, imagine how awesome it is to play with other people, whenever you want. Wherever you want. For gamers, this is most amazing thing in the world. You can make connections online with others that have the same interests as you do. Even if you don't have people in real life that "get you", you have a community where you belong. A real positive aspect that parents should not overlook.

But not everything is rosy and happy. Gaming has always had associated risks such as addiction or de-sensitization to violence (I'm looking at you [Grand Theft Auto](#)). But due to the ability to connect to anyone, anywhere, we have also opened the doors to strangers. In February of 2017, irate parents took to media to complain about the fact that the game [Roblox was full of pedophiles](#). These parents say their 6-8 years old were getting inappropriate chat messages and conversations

from other characters in the game. Am I surprised? Not at all.

Safe Games for Young Kids

I like to compare kids being online to kids visiting a park. When your child is very young you take them to the park yourself. You stand behind them and help them with everything they do. As they age you start to back off. You sit on the bench and occasionally call out things like "we go down the slide, not up" or "please don't push your sister". One day your kid asks to go to the park by themselves. You evaluate if this is a good idea. Can you trust your kid with their own well being? Can you trust them in the face of strangers? Is the park safe?

We should be asking **exactly** the same questions before sending children in to an online game. Any time they are connected on the internet they are visiting a public park that anyone can walk in to. Is it safe? Can they take care of themselves? What will they do if they meet a stranger that does something inappropriate? If your child is not prepared for this world, they should not be using these games alone. You can chose to [monitor kids online](#), but if they encounter something they should not, it may already be too late.

I have previously created accounts on at least 3 "child safe" games as a 9 year old girl. They were *Animal Jam*, *Lego Life* and *Kidz World*. All designed for young children. When I speak to students I tell them this story to remind them that the person they are chatting with online may not really be who they say they are.

Know What Your Kids Are Playing

Your best bet as a parent, regardless of your kids' age, is to understand what your kids are playing. Since most kids love when you actually take interest in their stuff, just ask! And in case they throw back an acronym at you instead of a game title, bellow is a quick breakdown of what is out there. And yes, there is a lot of overlap between them.

MOBA: Multi-player Online Battle Area. You enter the game and are placed on an existing team to battle it out against the other team(s). There is usually a goal like locating or destroying a headquarters. Popular Example: *League of Legends*

MMO: Massively multiplayer online. This is actually a prefix to the game types below. What was once just a multiplayer game online has now amassed hundreds of thousands of users. Game types range from groups doing puzzles, dancing, racing sports, or living in virtual worlds. All interacting by participating together and/or by chat.

FPS or MMOFPS: First Person Shooter. These are still popular on home game consoles. Here you are the main character. You can usually see the tip of your gun or your fists at the bottom of the screen. Virtually reality adds a more immersive element to this. Popular Examples: *Call of Duty*,

Halo

RTS or MMORTS: Real Time Strategy. More of a thinking game, here you often have to build cities or armies. I have heard stories of kid-entrepreneurs growing businesses to earn needed in-game currency. Popular Examples: *Age of Empires*

RPG or MMORPG: Role Playing Games: Here you get to be one or more defined characters living in a world. Popular Example: *World of Warcraft*

SGP or MMOSGP: Social Gaming Platform. There are worlds where you can create one or multiple avatars (computer characters) and use them to chat with and interact with others. Popular Example: *Roblox, Animal Jam*

MMOW: Massive Multiplayer Online World. No orcs, explosions, or battles here. This is a virtual reality to earth where you can meet, date, and hang out with other people. Popular Example: *Second Life*

Tips and More Help

My most important tips for parents is to set up a [contract with kids for their online device use](#). You can [download our contract template](#) for free. This covers your expectations and gives them solid guidelines. For overall safety rules around gaming in your house, check out [these excellent tips provided by Stay Safe Online](#).

All games are rated by the *Entertainment Software Rating Board* or ERSB (the logo seen below). You can [search their site for game ratings](#) that include descriptions of the graphic content or language as well as the ability to interact with others online.



Another favourite of mine is [Common Sense Media](#). They rate games as well as movies and shows. Their listings include a description of the game and ratings by both parents and kids.

Finally, I can not write an article on gaming and not include *Minecraft*. Though my kids never got in

to it, it is huge. I found this fantastic site by MineMum who explains how the game works. Her [FAQ sections had lots of great safety tips](#) too.

Play Safe. Have fun!