

understanding gaming

A guide for family and friends

- The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you better understand your young person's gaming and internet use and how you can support them to maintain a healthy balance in their lives.
- Most young people spend time online and gaming, and they are usually positive pastimes. However, a very small number of young people can experience problems in their daily lives as a result of their gaming and internet use.
- Over engagement in gaming can also be a symptom that other things in a young person's life might not be going so well.
- It can often be hard for parents to know the difference between healthy and unhealthy internet use and to understand when a problematic pattern of use might be emerging.
- Parents need to look after themselves and know where to get information and support when they need it too.

Healthy gaming

Games are an integral part of human behaviour. It is normal and healthy for young people to engage in play as a part of their daily lives, including playing games online.

Online communities are providing more opportunities to feel socially connected and gaming can help young people feel a sense of belonging. At healthy levels, gaming can increase self-esteem and social acceptance. It can also provide an opportunity for a structured daily routine and can be a fun and relaxing activity.

However, any behaviour, when taken to extreme, can have a negative impact on a young person's everyday life.

When should I be concerned about my young person's gaming?

Gaming can have both positive and negative outcomes, like most activities. If you're concerned about a young person's gaming, it's important to consider a variety of factors.

This guide can help you understand more about your young person's mental health and how to connect with them about their gaming use, so that together you can make more informed choices to support their wellbeing.

What are the warning signs that a young person might be experiencing mental health issues?

Whilst too much gaming or internet use may be an indicator that something isn't quite right, there are usually other signs that a young person might be experiencing a mental health issue. Often it can be hard to know the difference between normal behaviour, such as occasional moodiness and irritability, and an emerging mental health issue.

Feeling down, tense, angry, anxious or moody are all normal emotions, but when these feelings persist for long periods (some weeks) of time, and if they begin to interfere with daily life, they may be cause for concern.

Keep an eye out for significant changes in your young person that last longer than you might expect (at least a few weeks), such as:

- being less interested and involved in activities they would normally enjoy
- changes in appetite or sleeping patterns
- being easily irritated or angry
- their performance at school, TAFE, university or work is not as good as it once was
- involving themselves in risky behaviour they would usually avoid, such as taking drugs or drinking too much alcohol
- difficulties with concentration or motivation
- seeming unusually stressed or worried, or feeling down or crying for no apparent reason
- expressing negative, distressing or out-of-character thoughts.

Good mental health allows people to deal with the changes and challenges life throws at them and live their lives in a positive and meaningful way. You can help your young person think about the balance they have in their daily life and increase their participation in activities that support their wellbeing. Just like physical fitness, mental fitness takes regular effort too.

You can read our fact sheet on "What is healthy gaming" for more information on the signs of troublesome gaming or internet use. For ideas on how to support the mental health of your young person, visit our "Tips for a healthy headspace for family and friends".

How long should I let my young person play video games for?

Currently we don't have definitive evidence about how long young people should engage in playing games. As a rule, if a behaviour is having a negative impact on the young person's life then it's a problem. The Australian Physical Activity & Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines (published by the Australian Department of Health) suggest that screen time should be limited to no more than two hours per day for 12-17 year olds. This generally doesn't include purposeful screen time (activities that are interactive like work or school and in some cases gaming).

It's also important to consider whether gaming or internet use is impacting on other areas of a young person's life. Healthy behaviour relates to a young person engaging in a variety of activities and contexts (such as family time, friend time, alone time, and inside and outside activities). There are also certain activities that support a young person's health and wellbeing, such as exercise and good quality sleep.

If the length of a young person's gaming or internet use is stopping them from consistently engaging in a variety of other activities, affecting their sleep, hygiene or healthy eating, or being used as a way of avoiding necessary tasks (like school work or studying), it may be a problem.

Leading by example and setting boundaries as a family

Young people model their behaviours by observing the adults in their life, so setting an example with your own screen time is a good place to start. Talk with your young person about the importance of “screen-free time” (including gaming) and negotiate times when screen time is and isn’t appropriate.

As a general rule the following are good boundaries to set around screen time:



Limit screens in bedrooms and turn them off for at least one hour before bedtime, as the light and stimulation from screens can disrupt falling asleep and sleeping well. Instead encourage activities like reading, journaling or drawing at these times. If reading on e-devices make sure ‘night modes’ are available and used.



Get up and move regularly. Doing simple stretches can really help with back neck and wrist issues. Think about your setup.



Limit screens at meal times and when eating. This allows us to be more mindful eaters and encourages valuable family time



Screen time should not prevent a young person from participating in activities they need and want to do. If gaming, internet use or screen time are impacting on these activities, consider scheduling in time for them prior to gaming.

I'm a parent trying to understand gaming and my young person's gaming use. What can I do to support my young person?

It can be intimidating and confusing trying to understand your young person’s gaming and online experiences. Sometimes these can feel distant and disconnected from a parent’s world. Importantly, you don’t have to be an expert or even play the game, however, to help build and maintain a connection. Respecting the interest the young person has, and trying to understand what it is the young person gets from the experience will go a long way.

As a parent or carer it can be helpful to share some screen time with your young person, or to spend time understanding what they are experiencing online and when gaming.

Take some time to understand the gaming experience:

- the reasons your young person likes the game
- what they get from the experience
- do they see difficulties in the way the game is played
- what they do when the game doesn’t go well.
- who they are playing with and the kinds of interactions they have.

And the structure of the game:

- the rules
- the playing environment (and whether it is online or offline)
- the nature of the game
- the language/terminology used in the game
- the format (teams or solo, pausable or real time etc...).

Ask your young person to explain the rules and have them demonstrate the game. You can also get them to show you an online playthrough or stream, or even watch an esports match together. This will help you identify any concerns and have constructive conversations with your young person about their gaming use.

How to have a conversation if you are concerned

Raising sensitive issues with young people can be challenging but there are things you can do to make it easier for everyone. It’s important that young people feel comfortable and supported to talk about what’s impacting their health and wellbeing. You can encourage them by:

- managing your own feelings. Often young people are worried about their parents being upset, anxious, overwhelmed, shocked, angry, blaming, etc.
- letting them know at the start of the conversation that you intend to be calm and supportive no matter what they say
- being available without being intrusive
- spending regular time with them – even doing one activity a week together can help to keep the lines of communication open
- showing that you are interested in what’s happening in their life and trying not to focus on things that you think may be a problem.

There is no perfect way to start a conversation about mental health with a young person. It can be helpful to:

- let them know that you love them. They may not always admit it but this is likely to be very important to them
- keep trying (without nagging – it can be a tricky balance) to keep communication open with your young person. Sometimes a bit of perseverance goes a long way.
- if a young person knows you are coming from a caring place and that you are trying to be genuinely helpful, it allows for more engaging conversations
- take their feelings seriously – show empathy, listen carefully and don’t judge. Let them know you understand that they enjoy their gaming and internet use. It can be more useful at times to say nothing than to jump in with answers or solutions
- think about a good time and place to talk about sensitive subjects. For example, would they find it easier to talk while driving or going for a walk? Would they prefer to be out of the house with no interruptions? Would they prefer to have someone else there for support? It is always better to have these conversations when people are not distressed or rushed, but are feeling calm and safe
- let them know that you are concerned in a non-confrontational way
- remind them that talking about a problem can help
- acknowledge that opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can be hard and sometimes scary
- reassure them that you will be there for them and ask what they need from you (they might not know what they need)
- tell them that you are glad they are talking to you.

It can be helpful to begin with general and open-ended questions such as the examples below.

- 'How is [e.g., school/sport/gaming] going?'
- 'How are you getting on with [e.g., your friends/your siblings]?'
- 'How are you feeling about [e.g., studying/exams]?'

To focus on more specific thoughts and feelings, try using 'I/you' statements such as:

- 'I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help'
- 'I'm here for you, and we can work it out together.'
- 'It's OK if you don't want to talk to me, you could talk to [trusted/known adult]. I will keep letting you know I love you and that I'm here for you.'

Remember, a supportive family can make a big difference to how well a young person copes with challenges in their lives. If you would like more support or information you can go to headspace.org.au or contact a support service.

Looking after yourself is important too

When you look after yourself you have greater patience and can offer a more considered approach to supporting your young person. It is important to remember your own needs and know where to get information and support when you need it.

Here are some ways you can look after your own health and wellbeing:



Remind yourself that there is no such thing as a perfect parent, we each try to do our best everyday



You don't have to play or be an expert in gaming but learning a bit about this will help you connect and relate to your young person. There are lots of video 'walk throughs' and 'how to's' that can help with this



Eat well and drink plenty of water



Get a good night's sleep



Make time every day to do something you enjoy (this might even be gaming with your family and friends)



Ask for help or support for yourself from family and friends, or your GP or counsellor.

One of the most effective ways to support a healthy headspace is to model healthy behaviours yourself.

You can also take a look at our family and friends section on the headspace website: headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/ or our eheadspace group chats at headspace.org.au for more information.

What useful services are there?

As well as headspace centres and eheadspace, there are other services that can help:

- parent helplines (in every State and Territory of Australia) – Google 'Parentline' along with your State or Territory
- Relationships Australia: relationships.org.au/
- family relationships services: familyrelationships.gov.au/Services/FRC/Pages/default.aspx
- local family support services.

If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace.org.au, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider.



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If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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