CREATING A
SAFE ENVIRONMENT

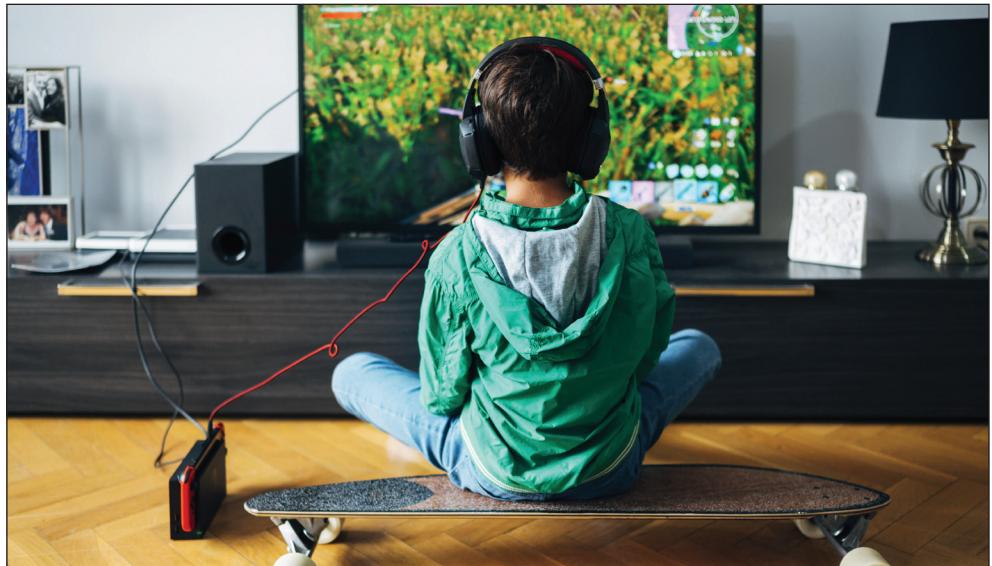## Gaming can be fun and safe for kids with right precautions

By Jane Sutter

Every parent knows that the Internet is fraught with dangers for their children, regardless of age.

Playing games online is no different. But before adults get overly concerned about the dangers, Liz Stanton has a message. "It's not the games; it's not the apps. It's what we do with them online."

Stanton is the senior trainer and family protection manager for Get Safe Online, a non-profit based in the United Kingdom. She's also a former police officer, having spent 25 years in law enforcement, with a good portion of her career working with young people in schools.

As the mother of two adult sons, one of whom is still an avid gamer, she knows the conflicts that gaming can create within families. Parents may think a child spends too much time online, and that gaming is fraught with dangers (bullying, predators) or not healthy for a number of reasons.

On the positive side, in this age of the Covid-19 pandemic where many kids are still isolated from their friends, gam-

ing allows them to connect. It also helps them to build motor control skills, employs their imagination and, for a child with a disability or serious illness, gaming can help them to fit in with other kids their age.

Gaming can also lead to a variety of different careers: game developer or blogger or YouTube commentator, just to name a few. "There's big money in it, and kids see that," Stanton said.

Stress relief during the pandemic

An international survey of gamers age 35 and younger and conducted in November 2020 for Kaspersky, a security company, found that 61 percent of gamers in the United States said that gaming relieved anxiety and stress. Gaming also provided excitement; bonding with friends and peers; allowed gamers to escape and use their imagination; and gave them a sense of achievement.

The study also showed there is a generational disconnect about gaming, with 27 percent of U.S. respondents saying they hide how much they game from their parents. They say that's because their parents think gaming is unhealthy or they are concerned about bullying or they think that games are too violent. However, 37 percent of U.S. respondents said that their familial relationships would improve if they could talk to their parents about gaming.

Stanton encourages parents to learn about gaming from their children as soon as they start to show an interest. She suggests parents talk to their kids about why

SAFE GAMING TIPS AND RESOURCES

- Have open and honest conversations with your children about their online gaming and the risks involved.
- Educate your children about the dangers of revealing private information such as their email address, home address, family members or financial details.
- Explain that not everybody is who they seem or claim to be, and their motives may be dishonorable.
- Tell your children not to respond to bullying or other abuse, and to report it to you straight away.
- Join your children in online gaming from time to time and randomly. This will give you an idea of the games they're playing and who they connect with.
- Set and monitor limits for the amount of daily or weekly time your children spend online gaming.

they want to play a certain game and watch them play the game or play it with them.

"The earlier you do it, the more trusting the child will be" toward their parent, and consequently more likely to talk to their parent if something goes awry or doesn't feel right when they are gaming, Stanton said. "When we talk to children, they say they wish their guardian would actually take an interest in the gaming world, because they know there is so much negativity around it. And if something goes wrong, they won't go to their parents, and then they have to deal with everything that's being thrown at them on their own."

Keeping kids safe

Stanton and Andrey Sidenko, a web content analyst for Kaspersky whose job includes creating content on Internet safety issues for families, offered the following advice:

Device settings: "To safeguard your child, you have to have your own house in order," Stanton said. "You have to understand where your dangers lie as well." That means if your child is using your device such as a desktop or laptop, set up your child for his or her own profile, so their games and apps are downloaded to it. Parents should make sure their credit card is not linked across all profiles. If it is, or if the child uses the parents' profile, they have access to everything. That means a child can rack up charges by clicking on pop-ups or gaming extras.

Security: Sidenko advised that a strong unique password should be set up for each service. That way, if there is a problem with one service, it doesn't affect others. Parents can use a password manager to facilitate this. Sidenko also noted that gamers and parents need to be wary of malicious apps that ask you to install an application to increase the gamers' chance of winning the game. Gamers should never enter their login and password into these apps because the account could be hijacked. Anti-virus software should never be turned off when

- Check age ratings of games to ensure your children aren't accessing inappropriate content. It's labeled age 18+ for a reason!
- Never give your child your payment card details as extras can be very costly. *Source: GetSafeOnline.org*

Internet safety checklist

For a checklist regarding internet safety based on the categories of children under age 5; ages 6-9; ages 10-12; and age 13 and over, go to *https://www.getsafeonline. org/safeguarding-children/*

To watch an interview with two mothers of professional gamers conducted by the video games editor for *The Guardian* newspaper in London, go to YouTube and search for "Mums Got Game." The three discuss the impact of video games on family life, how parents and gamers can find a common language and shatter stereotypes, and the opportunities for personal and career growth that the gaming industry and e-sports enable.

Tips to protect gaming accounts:

- Wherever possible, protect your accounts with two-factor authentication. To learn how, comb through account settings or, in a pinch, do an internet search.
- Use strong passwords—and a unique one for every account. That way, even if one account gets stolen, the rest won't go with it.
- Use a strong, reliable security solution that won't slow down the computer while playing a game, but at the same time will provide protection from cyberthreats.

gaming, Sidenko stated.

Parental blocks and parental apps: "Parental blocks are good but don't rely on them 100 percent," Stanton advised, because kids can find YouTube videos produced by other kids that will teach them how to override blocks on games. She suggests that parents talk to their kids (based on age) about which blocks the parents think are appropriate.

Privacy: Parents need to teach their kids to never use their real name or real photo or share their email address or social media profile, Sidenko said. "If all the gamers know about you is your screen name, then they can't harm you in real life." A fellow gamer may act friendly in order to get this information, and then use it to find the gamer and harass them on other platforms or even offline. If there are concerns about a certain gamer, Sidenko said parents should not hesitate to contact the game administrator or technical support. Likewise, parents should teach their children about the dangers of

online predators—adults who masquerade as kids to earn the children's trust and then send inappropriate messages. They may try to arrange in-person meetings, too. Kids should be taught to alert their parents to anything that makes them uneasy.

Bullying: Picking on other kids has moved from the playground to online and gaming is no different. Sidenko has advice for kids who are being bullied: Stay cool. Remember that the taunts are just words on a screen. Provocateurs may try to get kids to "fight with words" and become aggressive, even using foul language, to get a fellow gamer banned, in order to get them out of a match, Sidenko said. To counteract that, gamers can filter out chat messages and put the offender on a block list. Gamers can also report the offender. "Almost all online games provide mechanisms for complaining about users who taunt others," Sidenko said.

Both Stanton and Sidenko encourage parents to learn about gaming from their children as both a way to protect them but also as a way to form a bond. That doesn't mean the parent has to become an avid gamer, but it's helpful when the parent shares the child's enthusiasm for gaming, just as they might when the child plays on a sports team. "We need to embrace gaming and not be scared of it," Stanton said.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-based freelance writer.

Other helpful Internet safety websites and articles:

https://www.kaspersky.com/blog/ Search for topics related to gaming.
https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/online-gaming-advice/
https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/gaming-consoles/ (Offers step-by-step guides to how to set up parental controls for numerous games.)
https://internetsafety101.org/gamingdangers
For a free downloadable, illustrated book featuring a bear teaching kids about gaming and safety, go to *https://www.kaspersky.com/blog/kasper-sky-book/25495/*

Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**

Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

Withdraws from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

… and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webronauts Internet Academy:
http://pbskids.org

PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:
http://www.nsteens.org/

A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media
https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:
http://www.fosi.org/

iKeepSafe:
http://www.ikeepsafe.org/

Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:
http://www.faithandsafety.org

Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www. BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www. cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www. cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www. d2l.org

STEUBEN COUNTY:
Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6