



# Playing It Safe: A Guide To Good Gamer Parenting

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Is there any other entertainment medium that moves as fast as the world of video games? Keeping up with the state-of-the-art is hard enough for seasoned gamers, let alone busy parents. So how are you supposed to make sure your offspring's gaming entertainment is age-appropriate? Worry not: follow these practical guidelines and you'll be well on the way to maintaining a healthy gaming environment for your youngsters. We'll even show you exactly how to configure the parental controls on your gaming hardware.

## Crack the ESRB Code

Unfortunately, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) doesn't use the same age suitability symbols as the film industry. The good news, though, is that the ESRB's ratings *are* consistent across all consoles, handhelds and PCs. Full descriptions are available on [the ESRB web site](#), but here's the Cliff's Notes version:



### EC: Early Childhood.

In the ESRB's opinion, this game is suitable for kids 3 and older. No inappropriate content whatsoever.



### E: Everyone.

Should be suitable for everyone over 6, but may still have mild fantasy violence or colorful language.



### **E10: Everyone 10+.**

One step up from the E rating, E10 ramps up the fantasy violence a little and might have suggestive themes. But if your kid is over 10, this should be fine.



### **T: Teen.**

We're getting into the heavier stuff here: violence, gambling, minimal blood and infrequent strong language will all earn a title a T rating. Think of it as gaming's PG-13.



### **M: Mature.**

In practice, this is the highest rating you're likely to see. Intense violence, sexual content, blood and gore, and bad language are all fair game here. The content of an M-rated game loosely matches that of an R-rated film, and the same 17 year-old age standard applies.



### **AO: Adults Only.**

You won't see any titles with this stamp on shelves, and in fact you're very unlikely to see any at all, ever. Essentially restricted to explicitly pornographic computer games, and those simply aren't distributed in the USA to any significant degree. By law, AO games are only sold to those over the age of 18.



### RP: Rating Pending.

You'll see this on publicity materials for unfinished games. It means exactly what it says: the publisher hasn't yet submitted it for rating, because it's not finished. If you're looking up info on an unreleased game, you'll just have to wait until the ESRB gets to it (which will always happen before release), and if you know the game in question is already out, then you are looking at outdated material.

You'll usually see a set of "content descriptors" next to the age-rating stamp. These are a valuable source of detailed information on exactly what potentially objectionable content a game may have. For example, Halo 3 (which carries the M rating) has the content descriptors "Blood and Gore," "Mild Language," and "Violence." Other descriptors can warn of drug use, gambling depictions, or sexual content.



### Get educated

Though certainly useful in getting a general idea of a game's content, ratings only tell part of the story. Each parent has their own standards, and yours may not match up with the ESRB. For our money, we find them too prudish on sexual content and too easygoing on violence -- but that's just us. Understanding exactly what content a game contains is key to deciding whether or not it's appropriate for your family, and the only way to do that is to put on your lab coat and do some old-fashioned research. Search engines like Yahoo! will give you a good overview; if you have particular hot-button hangups, try combining the name of the game with words like "violence" or "bad language."

Other good strategies include checking out game trailers on sites like this one, because if a game is looking to trade on its controversial content, you can bet it'll be in the trailer. Specialist sites like [What They Play](#) and [CCGR](#) (which offers a specifically Christian perspective, but can prove useful for general queries, too) are well worth bookmarking, and don't underestimate the value of an appropriately honest older kid -- maybe a neighbor, family member or trustworthy game reviewer -- who can give you the inside track.

[>> Play, block, and talk](#)

Follow these helpful tips to stay on top of the games your kids are playing.

## Play them yourself

A family that plays together, stays together. Seriously. If you're uncertain about a game's suitability, rent it yourself and find out. It ought to be clear within the first hour or so if it's a no-no, and you're only going to be out the rental fee instead of a full-priced game purchase. (Opened video games typically can't be returned at all.) If the game in question offers a two-player mode, play it along with your child. You'll gain invaluable information about the game's content and how your child is relating to it. And who knows -- you might even enjoy it.

## Use hardware parental controls

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a way to password-protect a console so it wouldn't play games above a certain age rating? Yes, it would, and you'll be pleased to hear that each major console (and Windows Vista, although not earlier Windows versions) has such a capability. To set up the parental controls for your particular console, refer to the following official instructions:

- [Set up your Wii](#)
- [Set up your Xbox 360](#)
- [Set up your PlayStation 3](#)

Once you've made these changes, even if a friend brings around a game that doesn't meet your standards or if older children (and adults) keep more mature games in the house, your kids won't even be able to load them without your consent. Understanding these controls is your most secure line of defense against games that don't meet your standards and requires the least amount of upkeep.

Some consoles also include timer functions that you can use to limit your child's gaming hours. If you're concerned about excessive video gaming cutting into other pursuits - school, say, or sleep - you may find these particularly useful.

## Watch their purchases

You might be surprised to learn that most game retailers can be relied upon to enforce video game age ratings. [A recent FTC survey](#) indicated that underage youths have considerable difficulty purchasing inappropriate games, and the best performers were specialist game stores like Gamestop. Mistakes happen, though, and as there's no official law-enforcement weight behind the ESRB's ratings, your recourse is limited to complaining to store management (and, of course, chastising your offspring appropriately). There's no substitute for keeping aware of exactly what media your kids bring into your home, and that applies well beyond the video game realm.

## Online services: proceed with caution

Lots of kids enjoy the sociability and competition of online gaming via services like Xbox Live. Despite the makers' attempts to keep things clean, however, they still remain a rather "Wild West" scenario, especially when voice chat is thrown into the mix. Although it sounds draconian, the only way to be completely sure that your kids aren't being exposed to bad language, racial and/or homophobic slurs is simply to prevent them going online.

If that isn't an option, consider limiting them to playing online with friends you already know, or making sure they're aware that it's never appropriate to give out personal information to online friends. Removing voice chat from the equation should be an option, too - just take the headset away. Many popular games can be played perfectly well without the chatter, although your kids may plead otherwise.

You might also think about suggesting an online game like World of Warcraft, which does a fine job of moderating its players and preventing abuse (although it comes with its own set of [well-documented problems](#) and carries a T rating), or Runescape, which is a cheaper, less high-tech (and potentially less objectionable)

alternative.

## **Make sure they understand**

If your kids have a clear understanding of your position on objectionable media, they won't be able to plead ignorance if they break the rules. Make it clear that you have standards -- assuming you *do* have standards, of course -- and be very explicit about what they are and what awful consequences will ensue if they are ignored. Removing power cords to game consoles for a period of time is a good start, but we're sure you can come up with more creative ideas.

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