Video Games and Gaming

According to a 2018 study by the Pew Research Institute, 97% of American teen boys and 83% of American teen girls play video games.[1]

As a kid, you might have played Mario Kart on Nintendo64, Pac-Man on Atari, or maybe even Pong at your local arcade ... but video games and gaming have changed tremendously since then.

The graphics are better, the games are more intricate, and, in some cases, friends can even play together remotely from the safety of their respective homes. Although playing video games can be a great way for youth to practice teamwork and stay in touch during times of isolation, the social aspects of these games can also present a whole host of safety concerns.

Like a stranger approaching a child at an arcade, traffickers often approach children online through video games, using the game to lure children into a power-and-control situation.

"Connecting with children through video games has become a common technique for predators," says FBI Special Agent Kevin Kaufman. "Some predators eventually meet those kids in person, then trap them for trafficking purposes. They're soliciting kids with video gaming cards, PayPal, sending them games in exchange for regular photos. And those progress to more risqué photos. Anywhere where people have access to the Internet and access to kids, some people are going to try to use it as a tool to lure kids out."[2]

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, there are roughly 750,000 predators online worldwide at any given moment. And in a recent NCMEC analysis of CyberTipline reports of online enticement, it was found that nearly all the children reported not knowing the predator outside of their online communication.[3]

AGAIN, WHERE CHILDREN PLAY, PREDATORS PREY.

ESPORTS, MULTIPLAYER GAMES, AND LIVE-STREAMING

eSports is a form of competition that occurs online through video games. Most commonly, eSports is a structured, multiplayer game played individually, as teams, or even professionally.

eSports and other multiplayer video games have dramatically changed the culture of video games and gaming in general. Through live-streaming, these games have gained incredible momentum in our society. "Live-streaming" involves online streaming or broadcast of your screen while gaming. People can log on to platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and Periscope to watch you play these games. The benefit of this is some gamers who are good at these games can then gain backing, fans, and sponsorships, just like any other athlete.

Some of the best known eSports and multiplayer games include Minecraft, Fortnite, Roblox, Among Us, Rocket League, League of Legends, and Animal Crossing.

There are four basic classifications of eSports:

1. Multiplayer Online Battle Arena
2. Battle Royale Games
3. First-Person Shooter
4. Real-Time Strategy

Many eSports have dynamic chat features, enabling gamers to communicate with other gamers, and typically include group or individual settings. Consequently, in the course of game play, it's common for players to chat with people they've never met. Initially, this feature was set up for players to communicate within the game. Unfortunately, as with any other form of online communication, it can be abused.

Gaming has become a perfect place for traffickers to groom possible victims as a first step to exploiting them.

Because youth see potential fame in the prospect of live-streaming and eSports, the atmosphere can be competitive. If your child is playing against friends or live-streaming a game, they're likely to want their character to have the best weapons, the most impressive armor, and the coolest-looking "skins" (graphic appearance of the character or avatar, which can be downloaded, purchased, or unlocked) the game has to offer. To obtain these ideal character qualities, the player has to purchase packages or "loot boxes" offered through the game's software. In addition to skins, loot boxes can include extra power-ups to make your character stronger, newer weapons to make your character more powerful, and more. This desire for better features, combined with the risk from in-game chatting features, creates a breeding ground for traffickers.

After building relationships with young gamers (maybe after posing as a relatable young person, lying about their age, and hiding behind their screen), predators may offer to buy them loot boxes, or send in-game currency to show affection or companionship.

Once the trust is gained, the grooming begins. Online predators are then able to convince children to send a seemingly innocent photo of themselves in exchange for gifts. These gifts can take the form of gift cards or in-game packages.[4]

Take, for example, Minecraft, another popular multiplayer video game. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), its social capabilities have become a tool enabling the sexual abuse of children around the world. Sexual predators from North America to South Africa have contacted minors in their homes, convincing them to click links that route to child porn recruitment sites, and have subsequently recruited the children into various degrees of sexual abuse.[5]

NSPCC is a recommended resource with tips and advice for keeping children safe on Minecraft: www.nspcc.org.uk.

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN PLAY SAFE: [6]

1 Learn more about the video games your child is playing. What is the rating? Is it single- or multi-player? Is this game intended for adults, kids, or both?

2 Check out what parental control options are offered in the game or gaming console. These can range from mature language filters and chat blockers to playtime or spending limits. Although these filters aren't foolproof, they can be a great place to start.

3 Gently and appropriately explain to your child why it's important not to give out any information to anyone, whether they know them or not. Encourage them always to keep the conversation centered exclusively on the game while using in-game chatting features.

4 Teach your child to block and report users who are inappropriate. This gives them a way to *protect themselves* from online predators.

5 Make a no-headsets rule. This keeps in-game conversations between teammates out in the open for parents to monitor.

6 Play video games with your child. Not only can this turn screen time into family time, but it can also be a great way to protect your child while they are doing one of their favorite activities.

7 Keep the conversation ongoing! The more you show interest in their gaming life, the more comfortable they will be talking to you if something goes awry.

We recommend internetmatters.org as a resource to access step-by-step instructions on how to set up parental controls on gaming consoles.

Information and links provided in this resource are solely for educational and informational purposes and do not constitute legal advice.

[1] Perrin, Andrew. "5 Facts about Americans and Video Games." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 17 Sept. 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/17/5-facts-about-americans-and-video-games/

[2] https://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/human-traffickers-new-tool-to-lure-children-online-video-games-20190121/

[3] http://www.missingkids.com/theissues/onlineenticement

[4] STOPP Website Staff. "Online Gaming: The Newest Weapon of Human Traffickers." *Human Trafficking*, 7 Dec. 2018, stopptrafficking.com/online-gaming-the-newest-weapon-of-human-traffickers-part-1/

[5] https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/minecraft-a-parents-guide/

[6] Jenson, Kristen, and Vauna Davis. "7 Ways Predators and Porn Will Target Kids in 2019 – Be Prepared Not Scared!" *Protect Young Minds*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.protectyoungminds.org/2019/01/08/ways-predators-porn-target-kids-2019/