



# Gaming Handbook

BY BRETT LEE

# About Brett Lee:

Brett Lee, a former undercover internet detective and police officer of 22 years, is passionate about keeping parents and guardians informed about the risks facing children in the online world.

Now the founder of the child safety organisation Internet Safe Education, Brett keeps his audiences informed of new technologies and trends with view of reducing risk whilst creating a positive online experience for our children.

Thank you for downloading this Handbook. Your active interest in the safety of the children in your care will go a long way in keeping them out of harm's way.

## In This Handbook

Gaming has skyrocketed in popularity over the last years. In fact, [according to Digi-Capital's Games Prediction](#), the video-game industry is expected to generate around \$200 billion in revenue by 2023.

Gaming has now become a double-edged sword. There's plenty of ways kids (and adults alike) can enjoy video gaming safely - and it can be a fun, education activity for all. However, as games evolve there are a few risks we need to be wary of.

Now that many new games have moved online, predators, bullies and online trolls have even more access to children than ever. The roaring success of 'Massively Multiplayer Online' and other new video-games means it's no longer just social media we need to keep our eyes on. We need to be wary about who's targeting our children during playtime.

In this Handbook, we'll be running through everything you need to know to ensure the children in your care are safe while gaming. We'll take a look at some of the risks your children could be exposed to while playing them, early warning signs that something may be wrong, what to do if you identify a problem.

# Online Games

‘Multiplayer’ is the latest craze. And with so many new and exciting devices, online gaming can happen anywhere and on seemingly any device.

With the industry booming, you’re now able to play games with millions of other online strangers on virtually any internet connected device: Playstation, Xbox, Nintendo, Gameboy, Smartphone, Tablet, Computer - you name it.

This is great for families who want to allow their children to have some screen time without springing out for a whole gaming system - but it can also be dangerous. Allowing children to game on portable systems like tablets, smartphones and laptops means they’re easily able to do so alone and in private - potentially leaving them at risk. (We recommend keeping gaming out in the open. Don’t allow children to play online games in private).

The types of games available nowadays are hugely varied. For the purposes of this Handbook, however, we’ll be focusing on multiplayer, online games targeted towards children.

Having found this Handbook, I would assume you already know some of the more popular titles. Minecraft, Roblox, Clash of Clans, Discord, Fortnite, Call of Duty and more all allow kids to create online accounts and play in tandem with millions of other users around the world.

Users can often also communicate with others in the game, with in-built chat functionality. This of course, has its risks.

# Exposure To Predators

The major risk is, of course, exposure to predators.

Online, multiplayer games designed for children are dream hunting grounds for child predators. Not only are online children's games full of children, but having a game to bond over makes the grooming process easier. It's easy to connect with children via their interest in the game, and building relationships is easier when you're on the same team or fighting the same enemy.

Many of these predators hide in plain sight - meeting children in the game, gaining their trust (often through in-game gifts), and then moving the relationship to other, more private channels like Messenger, Kik, or other messaging apps or social media sites. In worst case scenarios, this will progress to them asking the child to meet outside in person.

# Cyberbullying

The internet has always had the potential of being a pretty dark place. Anonymity often brings out the very worst in people. This is clearly illustrated by the sheer amount of cyberbullying that takes place online.

Cyberbullying is no small issue. While it might seem like physical bullying's lesser cousin, it can be just as harmful. Emotional stress, self-harm, and in rare cases, suicide, are all very real consequences.

Cyberbullying in online games can take many different forms:

- **Harassing messages:** These can be both in, and outside, of the game - and they can be either public or private. Many games even allow players to speak to one another via headset, which can lead to disgusting and violent threats being made seemingly constantly on many platforms.
- **Ganging up on players:** Playground tactics are rife throughout the gaming world. There can be extremely exclusive behaviour. Lower level, or unskilled players (particularly younger children) are often unfairly targeted by others.
- **Password theft and viruses:** Hacking is another very real threat - particularly for younger children who do not yet fully understand the basics of computer security. Passwords can be stolen and accounts changed, viruses can be passed onto computers, and personal information can be posted online (a practice known as ['doxxing'](#)).

# Addiction, Obsession and Anxiety

Gaming can become quite addictive if not metered out in small doses. In fact, the World Health Organisation now recognises '[Gaming Addiction](#)' as a mental health condition.

The symptoms include:

- *Impaired control over the frequency, intensity, duration of gaming,*
- *Increased priority given to gaming over other duties and activities, and*
- *The continuation or escalation of gaming habits despite negative consequences*

Many games (in particular 'freemium' games) are designed to be quite addictive. The more time a user spends playing the game, the more likely they are to purchase extra, in-game bonuses.

If obsession or addiction sets in, players can retreat into their virtual world. Likewise, too much reclusion from the real world can increase the chances of developing social anxiety.

# Financial Risks

While some games are openly quite expensive to purchase, the real financial risks come from much more sinister business models.

Many free smartphone apps make it easy for children to spend real money in the game. As credit card information is often stored inside the phone, in-app purchases can be as easy as a few taps of the screen. And these purchases aren't as small as you might think. Some can be as large as \$100. In fact, games make up [92% of the Google Play Store's revenue](#).

It's no secret that many of these games target children with access to their parents' wallets. One 8 year old girl even racked up [\\$1400 in charges](#) before her parents found out what she was doing. Gaming can have serious financial implications if not kept in check.

# How to Tell When Something Is Wrong

There are definitely risks, but games shouldn't be banned entirely. They can be quite a safe and healthy pastime if played in moderation and within certain set boundaries.

However, if you do notice children under your care exhibiting the following, there may be a problem:

## **Anger about not being able to play**

If a child is asked to stop playing, and they show severe anger or act aggressively, there is a serious issue. This could be due to a few reasons:

- Gaming addiction
- Peer pressure to play, break a highscore, or level up
- Stress from cyberbullying

## **They are withdrawn**

If your child seems consistently quiet or withdrawn, it could indicate they are being cyberbullied, or that they are involved with a predator who is starting to worry them, or turn them away from their parents. Make sure you keep up constant communication with your child.

## **Nightmares**

Playing video games at night can over-stimulate young children before bedtime. This can cause sleeplessness and nightmares. If your older children are suffering from nightmares, this may be indicative of something much more serious. Again, always keep up the communication.

## **Struggling to focus or school results falling**

Neglecting schoolwork and other duties is often the first sign of unhealthy gaming habits affecting a child's priorities. If games are no longer coming secondary to real life priorities, this may indicate obsessive behaviour.



### **Lose interest in physical world activities or interests**

As gaming becomes obsessive, even formerly enjoyable activities such as sports lose their appeal. Reclusion into the virtual world is a sure sign that you need to limit screen time before the situation gets any worse.

### **Overly secretive**

If your child has been involved with a predator, they may start to try and hide their new relationship from you. This could be at the request of the predator. Alternatively, if they have been harrassed, pressured or bullied into acting against their will, they may also think they have done something wrong - even if they haven't.

This can lead to overly secretive behaviour. Again, make sure games are played out in the open, and that you are in constant communication with your child about what they are doing online.

### **Spending too much time with online friends, to the detriment to real friends**

Social activity is incredibly important for a child's development. If they are shirking social activities with real world friends in favour of more screen time or time with online friends, there may be a problem.

Making friends online can also be dangerous. It's often impossible to tell who is really behind the online profile, and why your child may be more interested in what they have to say than their friends in the real world.

# What To Do If There Is A Problem

Should you notice any out of the ordinary behavior or your instincts tell you somethings not quite right we recommend you apply the [5 Principles of Cyber Safety](#) and consider these strategies.

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## 1 - Communicate

### ***Talk to your child about it***

The first step that we always recommend is to sit down and discuss things with your child. In all circumstances, this is an incredibly positive course of action. Not only will it help you to determine what is going on but will also help your child come to you earlier if an issue should arise again in the future.

Play with them and show a genuine interest in why they love it so much. Ask how they chat with other players and identify whether there might be issues in the chat part of their game that can perhaps be minimized.

### ***Talk to other parents, carers, or your school***

You might like to look to other parents, carers or your school for advice on what to do if you suspect there is a problem. If your child is being cyberbullied by children known to them, the school can often resolve the issue quickly.

Sadly though, as gamers come from all over the world, this solution will not always work. Be wary that the bullies often won't attend the same school as your child. In fact, they might be in another country altogether and considerably older.

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## 2 – Set Rules and Boundaries

### ***Create clear use of technology expectations and consequences***

Rules are part of everyone's life. Road, school, work, and sport. We work within the rules

for our safety and to meet the standards of behaviour expected in our society.

Gaming is fun and needs some boundaries to encourage a child or teen to make choices that will benefit them in the long term. Start early so that children learn to self-regulate. Clear rules make 'fair play' the norm and reduce the need for you to play bad guy or fun police.

In your home you can create a Family Use of Technology Agreement that clearly outlines such things as –

- When –
  - How many hours of gaming (online and off-line) per day or week (with some flexibility during school holidays).
  - Curfew – off all games by an agreed time of night (prioritizing sleep).
  - All mobile connected devices (including phones and hand held devices) are off and in a public place by curfew each night.
- Where –
  - Only in public spaces in the home, or
  - In a bedroom or study with the door open and the screen pointed toward the door.
- What –
  - Only games that parents have approved. Age appropriate. Suitable for this child (considering each child individually).
  - No in game purchases or linking adult payment methods (credit card or PayPal)
  - Use language you would use in person, with your parents present.
- Who –
  - Only game with people you know in the physical world.

Discuss the rules with your child. Clearly outline the consequences of operating outside of the rules. Print the agreement and have them sign it. Display it publicly and challenge the behaviour rather than get cross with the child.

Their behaviour creates their consequences.

### 3 – Stay Current

#### ***Search the internet for information relating to your concern***

Online trends move incredibly fast. As new games and technologies are released, it can be hard to keep up, and make informed decisions. Luckily, there are plenty of up-to-date resources for parents and guardians on the internet to seek advice from. You might like to try:

- [InternetSafeEducation.com](http://InternetSafeEducation.com)
  - [CommonSenseMedia.org](http://CommonSenseMedia.org)
  - [eSafety.gov.au](http://eSafety.gov.au)
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### 4 – Parents Take Charge

#### ***Check other apps too!***

If your child is being cyberbullied or targeted by a predator, the problem is unlikely to be contained in the game alone.

Often, once a child has met a predator or bully, the worst will happen outside of the game in apps such as Skype, Kik or Facebook Messenger.

Be sure to check other social media and messaging apps too.

#### ***Implement consequences***

There are consequences when rules are broken or there seems to be an issue of concern that warrants a time off gaming devices. (Don't forget their phone.) Consistency is critical. Set the rules and the consequences and follow through predictably. Each of these would be time based, for example, for one day or three days.

- Reduce gaming time if you are growing worried about addiction or over reliance on gaming.
  - Create a rule to set an alarm and get off after 1 hour of play. Get up and do something else.
- Consider banning access to the game for a while.

- While it may sound harsh to ban the game outright, this is undoubtedly the safest option when serious issues arise. Tell your child the game is off-limits until the problem has been sorted out (Remember: no game is so important that children HAVE to play it).
- Uninstall apps or games that are causing the issue.
  - If the problem seems irredeemable, it's time to simply uninstall the game.
- Remove the controller.
- Turn off the WiFi.
- Take away the unit.

Some of these options are difficult when a child uses their computers and phones for learning as well as gaming. It is better to set up strong rules and monitor how well they apply them, than to wait and see how they go working it out by themselves. They look to you for guidance.

### ***Seek professional assistance***

If your child simply can't live by these rules and consequences, if their mental health deteriorates or they experience inappropriate anger or lie and sneak back online, consider seeking professional assistance. You're looking for a point where they don't 'love to play', they 'have to play'.

### ***Report to police***

If you suspect your child is involved with a predator, it is very important to go straight to the police. Predators often target children locally, with the intention to meet them in person. If you have any concerns that your child might have been or is being groomed online or there is a concern of a potentially abusive situation, err on the side of caution, and seek guidance from police. It is better to ask police to consider the information than to have your child harmed because you worried you might be wrong.

### ***Report the issue to the game administrators***

Although they might seem like the Wild West, online multiplayer games often have strong codes of conduct. There are definite rules about what behaviour is acceptable, and what behaviour isn't. The problem comes from having too many players, and not enough moderators to properly enforce the rules.

If your child is being targeted by a user, it is absolutely possible to report them to the game's

administrators. They will be able to review the situation, and take the appropriate actions to ensure your child is safe.

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## 5 - Use Management Tools

If you're worried that your child might be becoming obsessed, playing late into the night, or outside of your supervision, there are many cost-effective services that will allow your family to take proper control over their internet habits.

### ***Use Device settings***

Take the arguments out of the rules. Use the device's settings to limit access. Your phone, Xbox, PlayStation, computers/laptops/tables have inbuilt Parental Control settings. This is where you can set up curfews (when and for how long), block purchases, and limit the types of apps/games downloaded/used.

### ***Use a Software Solution***

There are many software solutions that empower parents to control internet usage within their home and on each child's device when it leaves the home. You can set limits as to what they are able to access, block inappropriate content, limit screen time, and set 'shut off' periods to ensure your children are getting a healthy amount of down-time from online activities.

# 5 Rules To Remember As A Parent

To wrap up, we've put together five simple rules to remember as a parent to keep your children safe.

- No game is essential to my child's development
- It is my right to decide what games are played and when
- I need to clearly outline family expectations and rules
- If I suspect something is wrong, I will act
- I can find any answer I want by talking to others or researching online

# The Parent's Safe Gaming Checklist

## **Communicate**

- Do my children know to talk to me if a problem occurs?
- How can I encourage my child to involve me in their game so that I can learn about it and have fun with them?
- Is there something the children would like to do off-line together? (check regularly)

## **Set Rules and Boundaries and Stay Current**

- Are our family rules clearly displayed and agreed to by all members?
- Do I allow my child to play online games in private?
- Have I set up all consoles in open family areas?
- Have I checked the games my children are playing, and are they suitable for their age and personality?
- Who are they connected to and can they communicate with others?
- Do they have friends online I do not know of or haven't met?

## **Use Management Tools**

- Have parental controls been set on devices within our home?
- Have parental controls been set on mobile phones?
- Am I in control of what my child is spending money on online?
- Am I comfortable with how much screen time my children are having?

## **Parents Take Charge**

- Am I happy that everything is going ok? If not, am I acting on this?
- Are all connected devices turned off at the agreed time each night and kept in a public place for the evening?

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

# Screen Resolution by Brett Lee



A must-read for parents and carers.

Brett Lee has spent thousands of hours as an Internet detective pretending to be a teenager online to hunt down and prosecute child sex offenders.

In Screen Resolution, Brett describes his experiences in real and powerful terms, profiling predator behaviours and exposing their sinister intentions.

Often confronting and at times disturbing, Brett's account will help you discern the truth behind the screen and what you can do to protect your families online.

Through reading this book, every family can achieve a safe and productive online environment.



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QUESTIONS?

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