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In-game chat: what parents and carers need to know

Think u know has teamed up with Ukie (The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment) to give you advice about online games and chat. While playing games online is often great fun, it's important you understand why your children will chat online, what risks there are and what measures you can take to protect them while they're playing their favourite games.

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Online games are really popular amongst children. 59% of 5-15 year olds play online games, as games like Fortnite, Minecraft and Roblox become increasingly important part of their social lives.

While playing games online is often great fun and a good way to chat, there is a chance that your children will play with people they don't know who may use in-game chat inappropriately to expose them to harm or risk. That's why we've put together this guide to help you understand why your children will chat online, what risks there are and what measures you can take to protect them while they're playing their favourite games.

Why do players talk to each other in online games?

Online games are social activities. Some are co-operative, encouraging players to work together to achieve their goal. Others are competitive, pitting teams or players against one another to emerge victorious. And then there are games designed with socialising in mind to allow people to connect and have fun.

In all these games, talking is either key for achieving objectives in game or for allowing that social interaction to take place. This is what usually happens and, for the most part, children are able to have safe conversations with their friends. But, as with any space for talking online, there is a possibility that the chat tools used to bring players together can be abused. That's why it's important to take an interest in any online game your children play to identify risks.

How does in-game chat take place?

Every game is different, which means that there are different ways of talking in game. There are a few common ways of talking though:

- **Built in open chat functions.** Using the game's built-in chat functions you can talk through voice (via a headset) or text (by typing on a keyboard) with other people in the game

- **Quick chat functions.** A 'quick chat' function has set phrases, so you can send short automatic messages to a team mate or player. For example, sending 'Nice shot!' to a team mate who scores a good goal.

- **Platform messaging.** Some gaming platforms let you send voice or text messages to other players, just like a messaging app or social media. For example, PlayStation Network or Steam Friends & Chat. Players give this number to their friends and other players so they can add them to the game and chat with them.

- **'Ping' systems**. Some games use non – verbal communication to 'talk'. A 'ping' is where you can alert other players to a useful item or hazard by 'pointing' at it and pressing a button.

- **Chat or messaging apps.** Players can also use external apps like Discord, Twitch or WhatsApp to talk to each other during the game. This chat can be voice, video or text. Some apps can even be set up to look like they are part of the game (called in –game overlay).

Players can also talk to each other outside of the game. This might be on social media apps, through the platform messaging or in other online forums and chat rooms.

What are the risks of in-game chat?

- **Chatting with people they don't know**. Gaming is different to social networks, as players often play against people they don't know. This may include adults.

- **Inappropriate or unmoderated chat**. While many in-game chat functions are monitored, and players look after each other, chat is live. In some games swearing and insults are common, especially when a player hasn't performed very well. Mean comments or insults can hurt, and competitive criticism might feel like bullying for some children.

- **Requests to chat in private**. Some people online genuinely just want to chat about gaming. But once they move to private chat, your child could be exposed to greater risks. They might share personal information or feel pressured to do something that they don't want to do. If the chat is happening on a different chat or messaging app, then it will no longer be monitored by the game developer's moderation tools or community team.

- **Offering gifts or trades.** Some people may offer to trade – or give – your child in-game items or currencies to earn their trust and persuade them to have a separate conversation outside of the game. Remember, once they're out of the game and into a private space, then it will no longer be monitored by the game.

Safer in-game chat

Games platforms and developers have put in a lot of settings to help manage or protect children from inappropriate chat.

- **Family controls.** Games platforms have in-built family controls to let you limit in-game chat to friends list only or turn it off completely. This means children can either only talk to people they know or not communicate at all.

- **Customised chat.** Most games allow players to customise chat options, including letting players turn off voice chat, text chat and limiting conversation to people they know.

- **Monitoring and reporting systems.** Games also use artificial intelligence (AI) moderation systems to filter or identify inappropriate chat. They also have reporting systems to let players report anyone behaving abusively, which can lead to temporary or permanent bans from the service.

However, these settings only work after they've been set. That's why we recommend spending a little bit of time with your child the first time they go into a new online game. It'll help you work out how they talk in game and help you work out what settings you may choose to turn on to keep them safer.

What can you do to help your child with safer in-game chat?

Fortunately, there are also a few practical steps you can take too.

- Play, or watch your children play, online games to understand how they talk online, who they talk to online and what you're comfortable with.

- With older children, who may not want you to play with them, have regular chats about the games they play, who they talk to and how.

- Use family controls and in-game settings to manage, limit or turn off in-game chat to make sure that you're confident interactions are right for your children.

- With primary aged children, keep games devices in a shared space in the house (for example, the living room) and use settings to limit screen time to help children to manage their time.

- To catch potential problems early, encourage your children to report inappropriate chat in game and to tell you if anything in the game makes them feel worried or uncomfortable.

If your child enjoys playing games, remember that there are plenty of games that aren't online that your children can play at home with you, or friends to help you manage interactions further.

What else can I do to protect my children when they're playing games?

Finally, there are resources that can give you advice on wider safe play practice, including:

- www.askaboutgames.com, which features advice about safe play including using family controls to limit who children talk to, how much they spend in game and time spent online.

- [The PEGI rating site](http://www.pegi.info), which gives information about the age rating system operating in the UK.

- The Family Game Database – www.taminggaming.com – which provides information on a range of games, including good games to play online for families.