



Games at home: guiding children in the world of games

“If you play games with your kids you get this beautifully shared experience with them [...] like

playing backyard football [...] it’s a great bonding experience” – Quote from an interview with a player – **PE02**

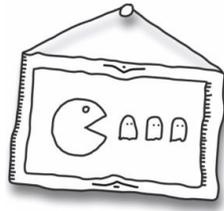
Keywords: [Children](#), [Ethics and Games](#), [Literacy](#), [Regulation](#)

Who will find this scenario particularly interesting? [Parents](#), [Policy makers](#), [Researchers](#), [Young players and their families](#)

Description

The influence games can have on children is a sensitive issue, and there is continued and serious concern about games’ potential for encouraging antisocial behaviour. Regulations are in place for labelling violent, explicit, or sexual content (e.g. PEGI in the EU or the ESRB rating in the USA). The main addressees of these labelling systems are parents, who should be informed about the content of the games their children play. Those same parents have the power to disregard the label altogether, either as a reasoned decision or because they lack the context to understand the meaning of the labels.

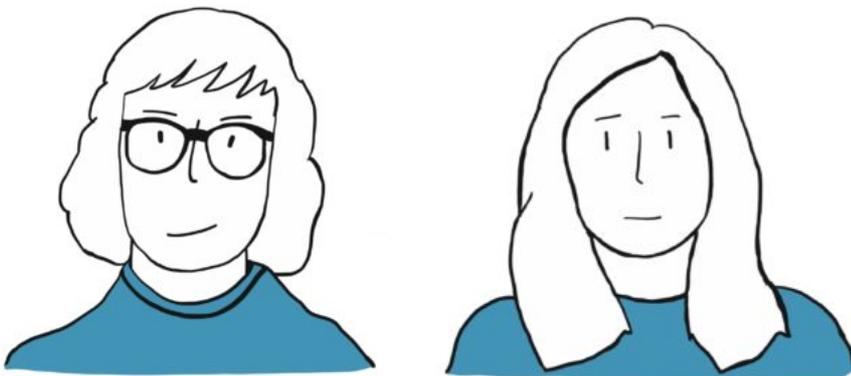
At their worst, parents can be completely out of touch with the world of games, or even see gaming as a useful way for simply ‘distracting’ their children.



Our interviews, on the other hand, offered positive parenting examples. Several of the players we interviewed reported that they had started out playing with their parents. This was especially common for women, who often reported having been introduced to the world of gaming by their fathers. The shared activity of gaming was not only a way for parents to monitor the content their children interacted with, but also a moment of spending time together and bonding. By taking an active role in guiding their children to the world of games, these parents were able to highlight those features of video games that they found most appealing (such as artistic value or creative potential), while sheltering their children from those aspects of video games they found most threatening, such as violent or unethical content.

On the other hand, when recollecting their adolescence, our players sometimes reported feeling that video games could be a private space: a way for getting *away* from family life, experimenting with their identity and discovering what they liked. In this phase, involvement of parents shouldn't be constant, and should focus on encouraging self-regulation and responsible use of games.

Meet Kate, a young player (aged 15) and Eleanor, her mother

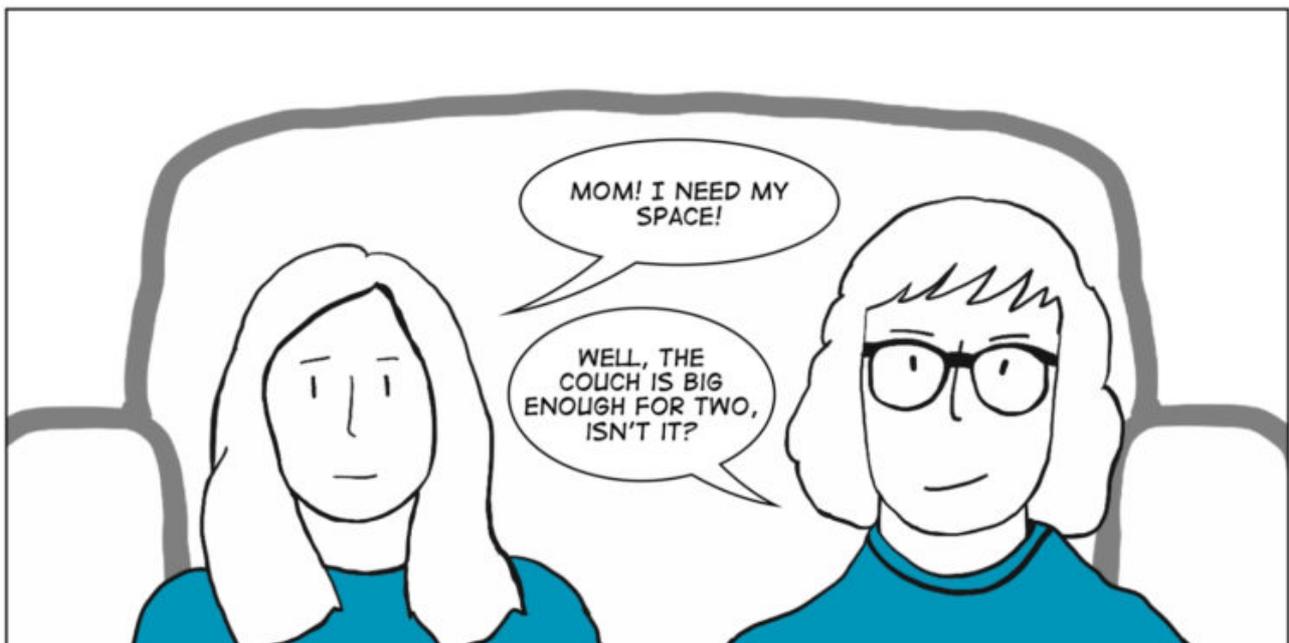


Eleanor, now fifteen years old, has been playing video games with her mum since she was five. Her mother, Kate, has always been a gamer herself, although she spent far less time gaming after her pregnancy. When Kate decided to start playing games with Eleanor, she tried to find games they could both enjoy – Super Mario Galaxy was the first game they played together, a game that's both light-hearted and challenging. Together, they also played more open-ended building games such as Minecraft and Terraria. Kate decided to let Eleanor play alone, as long as she did all her daily chores. Kate still framed gaming as a shared activity, though: at the end of the day, if Eleanor played on her own, Kate asked her to show her the progress or the creations she's made, and they discussed them together. This shared hobby sometimes extended

beyond the gaming time itself, as they often planned building projects or discussed strategies at dinner or while going to school.

When Eleanor was about ten, she started expressing interest in single player narratively-focused games. This proved trickier for Kate, since some of the games Eleanor wanted to play included, according to their PEGI rating, inappropriate content. Kate let the rating and game reviews guide her decisions regarding which games they could play together. So she decided that Eleanor could play Portal and Bastion, but she let a couple of years pass before letting her play Dishonored and the Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. Eleanor wasn't always happy with her mother's decisions, and they had long discussions about where the boundaries should be set. They also discussed the amount of time spent gaming, since sometimes Eleanor wanted to play until late at night. Kate strived to set rules that were both reasonable and flexible. She decided not to set a rigid time limit for gaming, allowing Eleanor to play longer during holidays and restricting her play only when other activities were impacted.

Now that Eleanor is fifteen, she's starting to consider her mother's attention as controlling, and she no longer welcomes it. She's started to hide the full extent of time she spends playing, and longs to play some games completely on her own. She's increasingly interested in some games her classmates are playing – games with more 'mature' themes, such as NieR: Automata and the Witcher 3. When they discussed this, Kate was initially hurt: does her child no longer enjoy her company? Has she been too strict?



So Kate decides to discuss the issue with the mother of one of Eleanor's friends. She discovers that the experience of this mother with gaming has been completely different from her own: her son frequently plays competitive multiplayer games, and demands

that the space and time are his, and his alone. Kate talks with the boy, and while she doesn't feel comfortable at the thought of leaving Eleanor completely on her own, the way the boy talks about his feeling of freedom and independence when playing resonates with her own experience as a player.

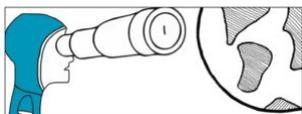
She decides to strike a compromise with Eleanor: Eleanor will be allowed to choose some games to play on her own, as long as they aren't too extreme in content. But on the other hand, Kate doesn't want to lose their shared gaming completely, and asks Eleanor to continue playing together, if only for a more limited time. Eleanor accepts, seeing that her sense of independence is respected, and not wanting to lose the bonding that gaming has brought them all these years.

In a nutshell

Parents should be ready and willing to play with their children, take an active interest in the games they play and foster their self-regulation with games. For children, video games can be an activity to be shared with parents; but in adolescence, games are also a space for self-discovery that should be respected.

Policy makers and researchers should promote actions to raise awareness among parents and educators about games, and about the power and influence games have on child psychological and cultural development.

Resources



This video from the LSE, featuring Prof Sonia Livingstone, is an entry point into a long-running programme of research (most of which funded by the EU) on the opportunities and risks that new media pose for children. There are many insights in this studies that can help parents/guardians who are looking for guidance to introduce and moderate the use of games in the family:

Sonia Livingstone about the risks and opportunities of Children Onl...



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Partners



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