In-game chat: what parents need to know

Multiplayer games like Fortnite, FIFA and Overwatch have evolved into social spaces where players communicate via in-game voice or text chat. It's an exhilarating way to play, but as with all online social spaces, there are some risks. Here's how to help your child enjoy the positives and avoid the downsides of in-game chat.

How it works

In-game chat is one of the keys to success in online multiplayer games like Fortnite, League of Legends or Overwatch - it allows players to quickly coordinate with their team through the game's built-in chat functions, using voice (via a headset) or text.

Playing in a team with people you don't know in person can be totally exhilarating - but it can get rowdy, especially in ranked matches. Most in-game communication is immediate and unmoderated, and in some games swearing and insults are pretty common - especially when one player hasn't performed so well.

If your child is younger or more sensitive, or you feel strongly about bad language, you might want to hold off until they're older before letting them use in-game chat. If that's the case, be sure to talk to them about why you've made this decision - and maybe agree to review it at a future point.

Settings vary according to the game and the platform (PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch etc), but most allow you to limit who can communicate with you. Some games and platforms offer the option to set up a chat which can only be joined by invitation - this can be a great solution if your child plays only with friends they know in real life.

Online bullying

Sometimes, competitive criticism via in-game chat can start to feel like bullying. Mean comments or insults can really hurt, so if your child seems to be upset or down after playing multiplayer games, encourage them to talk about what's happened. Be sympathetic, and remind them that the issue is not with them, but with the bully.

Be sure that your child knows to mute players who seem to be trying to upset them - they'll still be able to see that player in the game, and possibly in future games, but will no longer see or hear what the muted player is saying unless they unmute them. Reporting tools vary, but they're normally easy to find - and if a game doesn't have them, it's probably best to avoid it.

If your child has been badly affected by bullying, there are several **free support services** available. You can **read more about bullying through online games** on our partner site, Parent Info.

Being kind online

When someone is yelling at you, it's often tempting to respond aggressively too. This won't improve things in the long run, so encourage them to hold back if they can, and take a break if things get fraught.

If they're older, remind them that the chat will probably include younger children who might well be upset by harsh jokes or insults. Talk to them about being kind online as well as face-to-face; they have a choice whether or not to contribute to an aggressive game culture.

At the same time, let them know that they can always come to you if they have problems online - even if they think they might not have behaved as you'd have hoped.

Online grooming

Most children have fun gaming with friends and strangers without any problems, but there have been **some reports** of children being contacted by abusers through voice chat, so it's important they know what to watch out for.

Be sure your child understands never to share photos or information like their real name, school or address. They should be very wary if someone they talk to using in-game chat asks to stay in touch on social media or wants to start a private chat; and of course, they should never agree to meet up with anyone they haven't met in person before.

Make sure they get to know the **reporting mechanisms** of the game, so they can quickly block and report anyone who makes them uncomfortable. Tell them that they can always talk to you about anything that upsets them online, and you will always help them even if they've not stuck to your family rules. And if you come across something you suspect might be online grooming, go to the **NCA-CEOP** site where you can quickly report it.

If you think your child might not yet be ready to communicate with people they don't know online, all games consoles feature parental and privacy settings which you can adjust so they can only communicate with people on their friends list - check online for information about your child's specific console.

Alternatives to in-game chat

Some games, like Minecraft, offer the ability to **set up a private server** so that only approved players can enter the gaming session.

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