

Consoles at Christmas: A Handout for Parents

Many children and young people spend lots of time at Christmas playing online games. Some may even find a shiny new console in their stocking.

It can be tricky for parents to know which consoles are best for different ages. And there are all the usual worries about screen time, and whether you're setting off a habit you won't be able to break. We've put together some information and advice about the most popular consoles to help families make decisions over the festive period – and have fun together.

Nintendo Switch

With its broad roster of games and simple user interface, the Switch is often considered the most family-friendly console.

If you have a young child, the Switch might be the best option: most of its titles are designed for PEGI (age) 3 to PEGI 12 – including Pokémon Sword and Shield, and Yoshi's Crafted World.

The Switch also stands out from other consoles because it allows users to play both at home and on the go. And though the Switch is portable, parents can use the Parental Controls app to regulate spending in the Nintendo eShop, and decide the PEGI ratings their child can access.

PlayStation 4

Sony's PlayStation 4 (PS4) is the bestselling console of the last five years.

The PS4 has been praised for its exclusive titles – some which are child-friendly, like Ratchet and Clank or Knack 2. Sony's parental controls also make it easy to manage what kind of content children can access.

The majority of PS4 games are aimed at 16-year-olds and above.

Xbox One

Like the PS4, Microsoft's Xbox One has more to offer teenagers - but it doesn't boast as many exclusive games. One advantage of the Xbox One is the ability to play games from its predecessor - the Xbox 360 - allowing gamer parents to share their old favourites with the family.

As with the Switch and PS4, adults can also set up a parental account and customise their child's gaming experience.

Having fun and staying safe

Are screens dangerous?

Recent research from the Oxford Internet Institute suggests that screen time actually has little impact on wellbeing – but that doesn't mean you can't choose to set limits. It might be helpful to involve your child or young person in the process and agree some ground rules together.

How long children spend on screens is less important than what they do in front of them – and one way of finding that out is by joining in! It's OK if you look like a clueless parent and ask lots of questions – it'll show you're interested and may encourage them to share their gaming experiences in the future.

How can I watch my wallet?

Some online games popular with children include extra features, like loot boxes, that have to be bought in-game. Gamers don't usually know what they're going to find in their loot box, which can lead to repeat purchasing in an effort to land the items they really want. Often the games make it very easy to spend, and some children may not even know that they've just charged their parents' card.

Sometimes the games use techniques borrowed from the gambling industry to keep users engaged.

Many consoles, like the Switch, have special apps or settings that allow you to regulate spending - but if you're worried, Parent Zone and GambleAware's Gaming or Gambling resources include lots of expert guidance about what to look out for:

parentzone.org.uk/gamingorgambling

Are parental controls the answer?

Parental controls can be useful tools for managing access and avoiding accidental spending – but children and young people are highly resourceful and they often find workarounds.

It's important that children and young people develop the skills to navigate games safely and confidently for themselves. Encourage them to talk to you about the games they like and get them to explain how they work. This won't only help you learn about their world; it will also help them think about what they're doing online, and become more digitally resilient.