

Games come in all shapes and sizes! Free or paid for games and apps lure players with tempting creativity on mobiles, tablets, laptops and PCs as well as games consoles such as PlayStation, Nintendo Wii or Xbox.



Some of the brightest minds are at work creating new and ever more exciting games with the images and sound effects that make them so enticing. There are mission and quest-based games; sports and competitive ones; interactive games for multiple players. Big companies are increasingly investing in Virtual and Augmented Reality Games.

At best electronic games can introduce young people to likeminded friends and build teamwork, skills; fun and co-operation – at worst they can deliver addictive entertainment; with high levels of violence, stranger contact and potential real life harm.

Parents need updates!

[My earlier tip sheet](#) covers parents' basics: engage with your children in the game, check games ratings and even whether they are suitable for your child's age and maturity; parental controls and safer settings. Tips include what to consider when buying a game for your child. This is an addition.

Virtual reality – this is a thrilling and immersive experience as the player senses and sees a 360 degree environment: so much more exciting than real life! Sound and vision combine in an enhanced world. Headsets are worn and it can be quite difficult to talk to a child immersed in a game with her headset on! She will seem totally disengaged from the outside world as her senses are totally immersed in the world of the game. Users simply cannot look away, check their phones or social media, they are unaware of the time and someone else in the room. Virtual reality is a powerful experience for which you need special and often costly headsets.

Virtual reality games include: Google Cardboard or Oculus Rift, with many more in production.

Augmented reality games: You've heard of Pokemon Go, it's the biggest mobile phone game ever and doubtless too you have heard the stories of players going on a hunt in the real world while playing the game and even banging into lamp posts or falling down stairs, so absorbed were they. Players can interact with the real world at the same time as the computer generated environment which is layered on top of it, adding layers of context. Although gamers realise they are seeing a new reality, the enhancements help them play a game in the 'real' world.

What do parents need to know or do?

Parents used to worry about the content their children might be exposed to in video games but despite this very few checked the PEGI ratings which indicate the content. Few parents check whether movies or TV content is suitable either.¹ Now young gamers are immersing themselves in augmented reality and virtual reality as the technology gets even more effective.

Cheap and easy to get hold of: Augmented Reality like Pokemon Go is simply downloaded onto a smartphone making it simpler to get started and to share than VR. The game uses a player's actual



location and surroundings. This innovation is cheap and easy to get hold of making it poised for massive expansion.

It got kids off the sofa! At first parents were thrilled that something delivered through a screen got kids active and off the sofa. But then worries set in.

Children are learning to distinguish reality from fantasy. Some report seeing the world in a digitised form after playing for hours. [Melissa Meyer](#) points out that our subconscious cannot tell the difference between reality and the simulated environment we're seeing. She explains, 'your conscious mind might know that you're just playing a game, but your subconscious re-calibrates itself to interpret the new surroundings as real. It will initiate fight or flight and other psychological and physiological reactions in response to a perceived threat.'

There is also a much repeated fear that children can become desensitised to violence. They may seek out violence for the adrenaline rush. Another potential concern is that people behave totally differently in a virtual world. We already know that simply being anonymous online leads people to behave in ways they would never do to someone's face, this is often described as the disinhibition effect. Meyer writes: 'Researchers studied the effects of playing an avatar – a figure representing a person in a computer game – that has traits the user doesn't. These might include height, weight, attractiveness and age. They found that people would behave in a manner associated with that trait. Other users would respond to an avatar with a specific trait similarly as they would in reality. This could become an issue where VR avatars make users more inclined to be rude, crude, or even bully others. Children are especially vulnerable, with cyberbullying among teens on the rise.'

Panics are common with new technological developments and the research is inconclusive. But for common sense parenting it is clearly important to set some boundaries and discuss any games in depth with your child. Chronic gaming of any sort is likely to be harmful to a child or teen. Some players report being terrified in the game as their senses become overwhelmed. Depressed kids tend to be affected most. As in all gaming one of the biggest risks is a multi-player game where unknown players can enter the game and interact with your child. This can be controlled in several ways using controls and by teaching your child ways to check that only players he or she knows are in the game. Some games can be downloaded and played offline. Old fashioned pre-digital loving parenting is needed here to assess the impact on your child of the new developments.

¹ The Cybersurvey by Youthworks, 2016

Can this brilliant technology be used positively?

Yes. The following are described as starter apps and recommended by the [TeenSafe](#) blog:

Some augmented reality games are designed just for kids and, with appropriate supervision and limited play, are likely to be benign for most children and teens. Just as Pokemon Go offers a wearable wristband, some of the following apps either require or are improved by external hardware. None of it, however, is as expensive as virtual reality headsets. Here are a few good augmented reality apps to consider for kids and teens.



Toywheel: Simulate the experience of driving a remote control car with a car named Wheely. The virtual car beams into the real world through your smartphone after you print out downloadable “targets.”



Star Walk: Give your kids an early appreciation for science and astronomy with Star Walk. Download the app and point your phone at the night sky for information about the stars, constellations and cosmos you see above you.



Quiver: Formerly called Colar Mix, Quiver brings drawings to life. Print out special coloring book pictures on the Quiver website and download the app. Kids color with regular pencils or crayons, and then engage the finished picture with your phone and watch it come to life.



Curiscope: With a special T-shirt and the Curiscope app, your smartphone becomes a digital anatomy lesson as the person wearing the shirt is examined from the inside out.

Why not let me know of other examples you like?

@AdrienneKatz1