

How Adults Can Support the Mental Health of Youth Who Game

1

Understand the Benefits & Risks of Video Games on Mental Health

Thank you for wanting to engage with the young people in your life to enjoy the games they love in ways that are fun, healthy, safe, and open. **Identifying** areas of the experience that are positive and negative, **understanding** the reactions and emotions around gaming (these are critical life experiences!), and how to **respond** to youth compassionately and effectively are critical. We know it can be intimidating – so below is a simple chart laying out some “Benefits” and “Risks” to be aware of. You got this!

BENEFITS

- Builds social connections and community, especially for youth who struggle to find belonging offline.
- Provides stress relief and a quick coping tool for anxiety or mental health challenges. Allows youth to decompress from daily pressures.
- Expands their worldview as they can connect with gamers with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
- Creates a space for creative self-expression through avatars, world-building, or role-play.
- Strengthens problem-solving, teamwork, strategy, communication, and coordination skills.

RISKS

- Leads to isolation if it becomes the primary form of social interaction, increasing vulnerability to harmful online influences.
- Gaming is not a replacement for other mental health supports. If it is the only coping mechanism for youth, it risks serious challenges if video games are not available.
- Exposure to cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and stereotypical ideas about who men should be that negatively impact mental health like: anger is the only acceptable emotion; never ask for help; men’s value is tied to domination/winning at all costs.
- Hypersexualized characters (often women) can normalize misogyny and can lead boys to view girls as sexual objects not potential friends, while impacting girls’ sense of self worth.
- May contribute to frustration, aggression, or fixation on winning and online status compared to peers.



2

Identify Warning Signs of Mental Health Challenges Related to Gaming

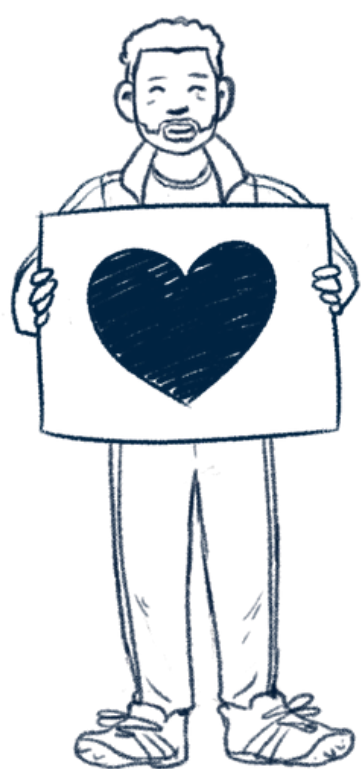
In order to support youth who are struggling with their mental health, it is important to be able to identify possible indicators a young person may be struggling or experiencing/ being exposed to harm online. **Look for these signs:**

- **Prolonged Behavior changes:** Avoiding in-person interactions and relying exclusively on online spaces, feeling obligated to play, declining school performance, loss of interest in other hobbies, or engaging in risky/age inappropriate behaviors.
- **Mood changes:** Persistent irritability, sadness, or numbness. Experience intense negative emotions (such as age-inappropriate anger, aggression) after a loss or when asked to stop playing a game.
- **Unusual secrecy:** Refusal to disclose who they're gaming with or what they're doing online.
- **Fixation on in-game status:** Overly focused on rank, status, or comparison to peer to the point that their sense of self-worth depends on gaming performance, which can lead to harmful or antisocial behavior (e.g., harassment or stealing a credit card for in-game items).
- **Harmful beliefs:** Expressing misogynistic views (e.g., "women are to blame for men's problems") or using humor that normalizes violence, harassment, or misogyny.

3

Respond with Curiosity, Care, and Positive Mental Health Resources

It can be hard to know what is underneath youth's gaming behavior. Before setting limits/rules or offering advice, take time to understand what emotions gaming may be covering up (e.g., loneliness, pressure, trauma) and/or important needs it's helping meet (e.g., friendship/connection, creativity, stress release). To help young people feel safe and seen, **use open-ended questions such as:**



- What do you enjoy most about gaming, and what parts feel stressful or less fun?
- Who do you typically game with and what are those relationships like?
- Who do you follow or watch (streamers), and what draws you to them?
- What have you seen or heard while gaming that made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or more alone?

With immediate concerns about anyone's mental health struggles, emotional distress, alcohol or drug use, or just need someone to talk to, caring counselors are available by calling 988.