

Helping your child manage boredom and the temptations of the online world in uncertain and unfamiliar times:

Gambling, Online Gaming and Addiction – Education, Awareness and Protection.

These are unprecedented times for everyone, and the world is facing a period of uncertainty and disruption. Challenging times brings the opportunity to be resilient, stick together and fight back, in our own way, but also can present problems that may not have otherwise arisen. With the government taking the decision to shut the doors on schools, young people now face a long period in which boredom, isolation and a lack of routine or normality is going to be an ever-present reality. With that, comes temptation and many will choose to occupy that time online, predominantly in three ways, gambling, online gaming and on social media.

As we are all increasingly aware the ease of access and exposure of the above activities make it increasingly easy for young people to spend huge amounts of their time and money online.

The brutal reality of any addictive behaviour is the more you do it, the more likely you are to develop a problem with it or rely on it for various reasons. Young people have been born into a generation which craves instant response, reaction and immediate gratification. Things which the online environment provides in abundance and unfortunately is what makes the online world so appealing. Not only that, but it can often offer a sense of belonging and identity, the opportunity to compete, communicate and compare yourself against other people 'on tap' is everything the young of today crave.

The current climate means that young people do not have the chance to play sport, or even watch it. From my experience many young people will instead be choosing to either bet on or virtualize it. Over the coming weeks, even months, young people face a time where they may not get the same excitement or rush that normal everyday life – whether at school or at home – will bring. Instead, they will try to recreate that buzz, or indeed try to conquer feelings of boredom, online. This is something we all - including them - need to be aware of, particularly the dangerous consequences that can materialize from this.

The combination of this uniquely challenging and anxious time alongside the constant barrage of advertisements and exposure, and let's be honest undeniably addictive products and games mixed with the competitive characteristics of many young people today, we have the potential recipe for disaster. Gambling can no longer just be seen in the 'old-fashioned' sense of the term; people of a younger and younger age are being drawn into these behaviours and this world through its most modern forms. The advent of loot-boxes, packs, skins and a plethora of other in-app or in-game purchases means that young people can not only waste a lot of valuable time but also enormous amounts of money from an age where, historically, the opportunity to gamble or spend such amounts rarely would have arisen. Never judge a game by its cover. What may appear innocent or, in the early stages, be about credits and everything being free, can suddenly change unbeknown to the child and parent. Awareness of this is paramount. The lines between gambling and gaming are becoming increasingly blurred and these types of behaviour are being normalised. The sooner we start approaching gambling and gaming as being intrinsically linked and the fact that often one creates a gateway for the other, the quicker we can react and prevent the issues of addiction and mental health which are becoming more and more prevalent across this generation.

I spend the majority of my day to day life sharing my story and experiences with young people, and on occasions their teachers and parents, but I wanted to offer some advice to parents that I hope will help with navigating the challenges of the coming months by understanding the dangers and pitfalls of these activities. The aim is to enable you to play your part in educating your young people on these issues, afford them the chance to make more informed choices on the subject and most importantly protect them and indeed yourselves.

This will also give you a complete insight into the warning signs to look out for and identify in your children, as to whether they may be potentially more vulnerable due to their characteristics and personality.

The easiest way to think about this is A – B – C – D...

A - Awareness and Acceptance

Please take sufficient time to be aware of what your children are doing online when it comes to online gaming and gambling.

Try to be vigilant of and observe how much time they are spending on these games, what is their behaviour like when they are on them and indeed off them.

Are you aware of any changes in behaviour over time and have you raised these with them?

You also need to accept that they are going to spend time gaming and indeed potentially gambling (if they are legally allowed to) because it is now so engrained in culture and society. It is what young people do now and how they like to spend their time both socially and independently.

Total prevention or prohibition is not the solution and can create even bigger problems whether that is them doing it 'underground' or their reaction to you adopting this stance.

B - Boundaries and Barriers

Ensure that you set very clear boundaries with your children when it comes to online gaming and gambling; both in terms of opportunity and finance.

Limit what they can do, when they can it and for how long.

These boundaries can always be loosened but it is much harder to have very few and then become stricter or implement them at all.

Clear boundaries and mutual understanding and commitment to these is key. You may get 'kick-back' or resistance when implementing or suggesting these but be firm - it's worth it and essential in the long run.

It is also essential to implement and activate 'parental controls' or blocks. These will ensure that young people have definitive barriers in place to resist the temptation to do something, buy something or play in something that they know they shouldn't and you don't want them to or know it is best for them not to. This can be done on devices and specific games.

All the information you require can be found here:

<https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/parental-controls/>

C - Clarity and Consistency

Be clear on what your children are playing and doing and what your expectations are.

Please ensure that you are aware of the ratings and content of every game that they are playing regularly.

There will be parents who do not follow these guidelines and chose to allow their young people to do what they want.

That is a risk and a risk not worth taking. There are very good reasons why there are age limits and laws around gambling and gaming and ultimately its vital you adhere to these.

You must be in control not them.

It is vital that you maintain an element of control and ensure that you dictate terms not them and be consistent with these and your messages.

It is easy for you to not have the knowledge, understanding or awareness and for them to take advantage of this and abuse this, please do what you can to ensure this isn't the case.

It is all about control and moderation. If a young person can maintain control of time, money and their mental health then they will be able to maintain a 'safe' relationship.

Understanding it is so easy to lose 'control' and the loss of any one of those three factors can be very dangerous. It is vital that both they and you pay close attention to the impact on mental health. Anger, insomnia, low self-esteem or distress can all arise from a negative relationship with gambling and gaming and staying in control of these is essential.

Something that consistently has a detrimental effect on wellbeing cannot be good for anyone.

D - Discussion and 'Drawing the Line'

Talking is so powerful and the most important thing at all stages of any relationship with gambling and online gaming. It is vital that you talk to your children about these topics. This promotes transparency and makes them aware that they can ask questions without being judged, put their hands up when they make mistakes without the fear of an adverse reaction and the confidence to speak up if needed.

Facilitate conversations with them, discuss your own relationship with either, talk about adverts, implications etc it is all part of their education. Discuss stories that you read in the media about young people or others who highlight the dangers and pitfalls of this.

Remember to 'draw the line' somewhere. If you have concerns, act on instinct.

Talk to other parents about it regularly.

Sometimes it's simply a case of saying 'no'. Not always but sometimes and ensuring that you exercise this when most needed can make the difference.

Moderation, understanding, awareness, vigilance and control are the keys to ensuring that you protect your young ones from ever suffering the harm that I did.

Initiative conversations:

- What are their favourite games and why?
- Which games are on your children's wish list(s)?
- Which rating categories are OK for your children to play, which ones require permission, and which are off-limits? Don't forget to give them your reasons too!
- Are there specific types of content or content descriptors that are off limits?
- Do any of the games your children play include online multiplayer features? If so:
- Do they need permission before playing online?
- Are there rules regarding with whom your children can play online?
- Have your children ever seen or heard inappropriate behaviour from other players?
- Do your children know what to do and whom to contact, if they're being bullied or harassed online?
- Do your children know to never give out personal information online?
- Have you set parental controls on your family's video game system(s), mobile device(s), and computer(s)?
If so:
- What's the highest rating allowed?
- Have you set restrictions on in-game purchases, time spent playing, internet and browser access, or with whom your children can play online?
- Do you and your children understand what (if any) personal information will be collected in the game, why it's being collected, and with whom it's shared? (If not, check the game's privacy policy.)
- Are there other house rules regarding which games are allowed, when, and how long they can be played (like number of hours each day, only after homework and chores, etc.)?

Practical Steps

<https://www.esrb.org/tools-for-parents/parental-controls/>

- Block by Age Rating
- Control Spending
- Limit Time Spent
- Restrict Communication

The 'Do's and Don'ts' when it comes to protecting you son and daughter from the dangers of gambling

- **Don't** glamorise gambling in the household. Similarly, one parent who glamorises it and one who hates it or completely discourages it, they will not know who to follow.
- **Don't** gamble in front of them.
- **Don't** be blasé about its dangers or indeed encourage them to gamble.
- **Don't** encourage or expose to small bets from a young age (grand national, sports betting etc).
- **Don't** fund or enable gambling by giving them too much money or constantly 'bailing' them out or 'topping' them up when they have used it for gambling.
- **Don't** link your personal banking/credit to games they are playing online.

- **Do** encourage open and honest conversation from a young age.
- **Do** lead by example – be honest about your relationship with gambling and your views.
- **Do** set time limits for any online activities.
- **Do** talk about the potential consequences of gambling.
- **Do** promote responsibility.
- **Do** manage and scrutinise finances if you have concerns or you are aware they partake in these activities a lot. If it is not a problem, they should not have anything to hide.
- **Do** restrict access and opportunity.
- **Do** encourage them to read literature – both about gambling, addiction and self-help books.
- **Do** remove ads from all social media, reduce what they can see on YouTube. (block ads)
- **Do** ask what they already know about gambling and their relationship with it.
- **Do** make them understand what gambling is, even in its simplest form and further their education on an increasingly relevant topic.

Characteristics of someone who may be potentially most vulnerable:

- High risk working environment – professional sport, financial services, gambling industry.
(More relevant for adults and older people but useful for those of university age or young adults)
- Access to money
- Lack of money
- Young for their age and naïve or someone who thinks they are invincible.
- Negative life events, loss of job, death, relationships
- Lonely or very independent people
- Gambling to win money rather enjoyment
- Competitive people – drug (winning and losing)
- All or nothing type person
- Impulsive
- Mood disorder
- ADHD/ADD Diagnosis
- People who suffer with mental health issues
- 'Addictive Personality'



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