

Video Games and Emotional Regulation

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Why do youth game?

Gaming is more than just playing. It's about creativity, imagination, escape, competition, collaboration, belonging, achievement, and self-discovery.

How can video games impact mental health positively?

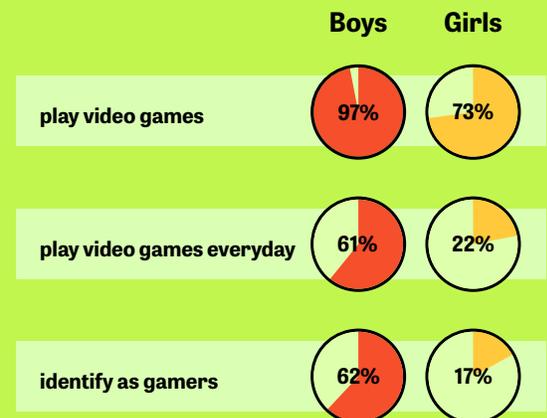
- **2/3 of teen boys** say they feel more like their “true self” in gaming spaces than in “real life.”
- A vast **majority of young men (16-26)** report that video games help them connect with guy friends in supportive ways, and share their problems, worries, and concerns with other men.
- Builds social connections and community, especially for youth who struggle to find belonging offline – **47% of teens** say they have made a friend through gaming and nearly half say that gaming improves their friendships.
- Enhances problem-solving, teamwork, strategy, communication, and coordination skills.
- Provides an outlet for stress relief and relaxation.
- Supports creative self-expression and exploration through avatars, game design, or role-play.

How can video games impact mental health negatively?

- Isolates players from in-person connections if it becomes their only source of social interaction.
- Leads to frustration, aggression, or obsession over “winning” and online status compared to peers.
- Hypersexualizes female avatars and characters, which can normalize misogyny and lead boys to view girls as sexual objects not potential friends, while impacting girls' sense of self worth.
- Exposure to cyberbullying, harassment, or offensive content (including misogynistic or homophobic or racist comments) and pressure to participate in this culture – **41% of teens** have been called an offensive name while gaming, 12% have been physically threatened, and 8% have been sent unwanted sexually explicit content.



How often do youth play video games?



If you are concerned about immediate harm to a youth's physical or mental wellbeing, please reach out to a professional using **these resources!**

What Games Are Youth Playing?

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Parent Guides for each game linked in the green bubbles.

Sandbox/Open-World Games

Users can construct worlds, design games, and explore others' creations. Can provide a space for problem-solving, creativity, personal expression, and shared achievement.



Precaution: These games often include user-generated content that is not appropriate for all ages and online chatting with strangers.

Action Games

Physical challenges centered around the player. Can promote strategic thinking, skill mastery, collaboration or competition, and group identity through shared missions and ranks.



Precaution: Many action games feature shooting, graphic violence and mature content.

Role-Playing Games (RPGs)

Players develop a character and progress through a story, with a large world to explore. Can encourage strategic thinking, patience, long-term goal setting, and connection through trading or battling.



Precaution: RPGs can include online chatting with strangers, long play sessions, and mature themes.

Co-Operative Games

Co-op games involve 2+ players cooperating on a shared objective, encouraging teamwork, strategy, and communication.



Sports Games

Sports games simulate real sports teamwork and rivalry. Can strengthen sportsmanship and connection through shared interests.



Popular Gaming Communities

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Discord

A platform where users join communities called “servers” to chat by message or voice chat while gaming.

These communities of friends or strangers who share a common interest cultivate a sense of belonging, connection, teamwork and shared humor.



A livestreaming platform where players (called streamers) broadcast their games for others to watch. Streamers often serve as real role models for boys and are looked up to for their skill, confidence, or personality.

Gamers can interact with the streamers live, which builds a sense of connection and shapes what they value.

reddit

On topic-specific “subreddits”, on the online site Reddit, foster knowledge sharing and belonging as boys share gaming tips, strategies, memes, and opinions.

When used as the main source of answers, Reddit can define what is “normal” or “true” in gamers’ eyes, which if left unchecked can lead to harmful views.



How to make informed choices about age-appropriate games?

You can use the [ESRB \(Entertainment Software Rating Board\)](#) to see game ratings, content descriptions, and tools for parents to limit in-game spending or online interactions.

Common Sense Media carries [guidance for parents](#) on some of the biggest youth games and platforms.

Mentoring Tipsheet

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1 Show interest!

- Game with youth or accompany them while they play.
- See what they are being exposed to, and witness how gaming affects their mood and well-being.
- Express curiosity about characters, strategy, and plot.

2 Learn about their gaming habits.

Before setting limits or offering advice, take time to understand each youth's gaming experience. How do they feel while gaming? Fun? Stressed? Lonely? Connected? To help youth feel safe and seen, ask open-ended questions:

- 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 (like streamers), and what draws you to them?
- What does gaming give you right now that you're not getting in other parts of your life right now?

3 Encourage applying gaming skills offline.

Ask how they build friendships online, or how they handle challenges in a game, and then brainstorm ways to use those skills to build friendships and navigate challenges offline.

4 Spot and respond to warning signs of risks or mental health challenges.

- **Prolonged behavior changes:** avoiding in-person interactions or relying exclusively on online spaces, feeling obligated to game, declining school performance, loss of interest in other hobbies, losing sleep for late-night gaming.
- **Mood changes:** persistent irritability, sadness, or numbness. Experience intense negative emotions (such as age-inappropriate anger or 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, hiding increased spending on in-game purchases.
- **Fixation on in-game status:** Overly focused on rank, status, or comparison to peers, or sense of self-worth tied to gaming performance, which can lead to in-game harassment or excessive in-game spending.
- **Harmful beliefs:** using humor that normalizes violence, harassment, or misogyny.
- Check out the [gaming-specific mental health tip sheet](#).
- Take the [Team: Changing Minds](#) free online 45 minute training to learn how to identify youth mental health warning signs and respond supportively.



“Level Up! Emotional Regulation”

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Questions to Spark Reflection and Dialogue with Youth



To watch the video, click the thumbnail or head to:

amaze.org/video/mental-health-how-gaming-improves-emotional-regulation/

1. What video games do you like to play? How does gaming impact your wellbeing or mental health, like mood, focus, friendships, sleep?
2. In the video, Mark snapped at his mom. What do you think led to that reaction?
3. When have you felt heated or overwhelmed while gaming? Do those feelings linger after you stop playing?
4. What can we (or Mark) do to cool down and deal with emotions in a healthier way?
5. In the video, Mark asked for support to fight the yellow blob. Who do you ask for support online and offline?
6. What strengths or skills was Mark using in video games that could help him be successful offline too?
7. How can you tell if someone is a good friend online? How is it similar and different from being a good friend offline?



Wrap Up Points

- 1 **Your gaming world impacts your well-being offline.** Gaming can impact our mental health in both positive and negative ways. It's important to reflect on how you feel and find a healthy balance!
- 2 **Managing stress takes practice.** Take time to pause, reflect, and learn what helps you cool down.
- 3 **Asking for help in real life is a sign of strength.** Reach out to someone you trust (an adult mentor or a friend) when you're feeling overwhelmed or down. Be supportive when your friends are struggling too!