



Understanding Gaming – A guide for family & whānau

Most young people spend time online and gaming. Usually these are positive activities. However, a small number of young people experience problems in their daily lives because of their gaming and Internet use.

It can be hard as a family member or friend to know the difference between healthy and unhealthy web use and gaming, and to recognise the warning signs when gaming and Internet use are becoming unhealthy.

This guide is designed to help you better understand your young person's gaming and Internet use. It also provides information about how you can support them to use the internet in a healthy way.

Healthy Gaming

Games are part of human behaviour. It is normal and healthy for young people to play games as a part of their everyday lives and this includes playing games online.

Gaming can help young people connect with each other and feel a sense of belonging. At healthy levels, it can support young people to feel like they are an accepted part of a social group and can improve self-esteem. It can also be a fun and relaxing activity and part of a structured daily routine.

However, gaming is not always a positive activity. Like any behaviour, when gaming is taken to the extreme, it can have a negative impact on young people and their everyday lives.



What are the warning signs that a young person might be experiencing mental health issues?

Many family and friends might worry about the mental health of a young person if they are gaming and using the Internet for long periods of time. Sometimes gaming and being on the web for long periods of time is a sign that something isn't quite right, but not always. Usually, if a young person is experiencing mental distress, there will be other signs as well. It is important to know what warning signs to look out for and ask your young person about it if you're concerned.

As a friend or family member, it can be hard to know the difference between normal behaviour, and signs of mental health issues. Feeling down, tense, angry, anxious or moody from time to time is normal. When these feelings go on for long periods of time (e.g. a few weeks or more) and if they begin to get in the way of everyday activities, they may be warning signs of mental distress.



Keep an eye out for changes in mood and behaviour that last longer than a few weeks. For example, your young person might:

- ✂ lose interest in other activities that they would normally enjoy
- ✂ experience changes in sleeping or appetite
- ✂ become angry or irritated very easily
- ✂ find it harder to keep up with their work at school or at their job
- ✂ involve themselves in risky behaviour they would usually avoid, such as taking drugs or drinking too much alcohol
- ✂ find it hard to concentrate or stay motivated, seem more stressed or worried than usual, or feel down or cry for no apparent reason
- ✂ express negative or distressing thoughts that are unusual for them.

Read our factsheet on [‘What is healthy gaming’](#) for more information about the warning signs of troublesome gaming and Internet use.

How long should I let my young person play video games for?

Gaming behaviour is quite new to the world of health science and at the moment there is no hard and fast rule. Generally, if a young person’s gaming or internet use is having a negative impact on their everyday life, then it’s a problem.

Some agencies suggest that teenagers should spend no more than two hours each day for gaming or Internet use. It’s OK for young people to spend longer online when they are using their computer for school or work.

It is also important to think about whether a young person’s gaming or Internet use is having an effect on other areas of life that are important for health and wellbeing. To be healthy, a young person needs to take part in a range of different activities, with different people (e.g. family time, friend time, alone time, and inside and outside activities). Young people also need plenty of sleep and exercise to support their health and wellbeing.

If a young person is spending so much time on gaming or on the web that they can’t take part in different activities, spend time with different people, exercise, or get enough sleep, then their internet use or gaming may be a problem.



What can I do?

Young people copy the behaviours of their adults in their life, so setting an example with your own screen time and Internet use is a good place to start. Talk with your young person about the importance of “screen free time” (including gaming) and when screen time is and isn’t appropriate.

The suggestions below might help your family to set boundaries for screen time use:

- ✂ power down an hour before bedtime by putting down all devices. Doing something relaxing or reading, and keeping out of bright light, tells our brain to start winding down
- ✂ no screen time in bed. Screen time can interfere with your body’s natural sleep rhythm. It can also sometimes trick your body into thinking its daytime. Move devices into another room so there is no temptation
- ✂ make meals a screen-free time. This creates a great opportunity for you to be together as a family. Read our digital detox factsheet for more ideas
- ✂ prioritise activities. If your young person is spending so much time on gaming and internet use that they can’t take part in different activities, spend time with different people, exercise, or get enough sleep, you can try setting specific times of day for other activities that must be done before gaming or internet use is allowed.

The Mental Wealth website also has tips on how to do a [digital detox](#).

For parents

As a parent or caregiver, it can be helpful to share some screen time with your young person, or to spend some time getting to know what they are experiencing online and when gaming.

Take some time to talk positively with your young person to help you understand the gaming experience. You might like to ask:

- ✂ **the reasons why they like the game**
- ✂ **what they get from the experience**
- ✂ **what they find difficult about playing the game**
- ✂ **what they do when the game doesn’t go well.**

You can also take the time to learn about the rules and structure of the game. You can find out about:

- ✂ **the rules**
- ✂ **the playing environment**
- ✂ **the type of the game**
- ✂ **the language/terminology used in the game**

- ✂ **the format (is it played in teams or solo, is it plausible or do people play in real time, etc.).**

Understanding these things will help you to identify any concerns and will help you to have supportive conversations with your young person about their gaming.

If you are concerned, talk about it.

Here are some tips:

- ✂ **Talk calmly**

Think about what you can do to manage your own feelings. Often young people are worried about their parents being upset, anxious, overwhelmed, shocked, or angry at them, etc. If your young person can see that you can stay calm and listen, they are more likely to talk to you.

At the start of the conversation, you can let your young person know that you will do your best to stay calm and be supportive, no matter what they say.

- ✂ **Be available**

Let your young person know that you are available if they ever want to talk.

Spend regular time with your young person – even doing just one activity together a week can help make it easier to talk.

- ✂ **Show you're interested**

Show you're interested in what's happening in your young person's life and try not to focus on things that you think are a problem.

How to start the conversation

Remember there is no perfect way to start a conversation about mental health with a young person.

It can be helpful to start with general and open-ended questions such as the examples given below:

- ✂ 'How is [e.g., school/sport] going?'
- ✂ 'How are you getting on with [e.g., your friends/your siblings]?'
- ✂ 'How are you feeling about [e.g., studying/exams]?'

It's good to focus on specific thoughts and feelings. You can try using 'I/you' statements to help make this easier:

- ✂ 'I've noticed that you seem to have a lot on your mind lately. I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help'.
- ✂ 'It seems like you [haven't been yourself lately/have been up and down], how are things going?'



- ✂ 'You seem [anxious/sad], what is going on for you? We can work it out together.'
- ✂ 'It's OK if you don't want to talk to me. You could talk to [trusted/known adult]. I will keep letting you know I love you and am concerned.'

It can also help if you try to:

- ✂ take your young person's feelings seriously. Show empathy, listen carefully, and don't judge
- ✂ let your young person know that you understand that they enjoy their gaming and internet use
- ✂ spend more time listening than talking. It can be more useful at times to say nothing than to jump in with answers or solutions
- ✂ let your young person know that you love them. They may not always admit it, but this is likely to be very important to them
- ✂ think about a good time and place to talk about sensitive subjects such as mental distress. For example, would they find it easier to talk while driving or going for a walk? Would they prefer to be out of the house with no interruptions? Would they prefer to have someone else there for support? It is always better to have sensitive conversations when people are feeling calm and safe
- ✂ let your young person know that you are concerned and explain why. It might help to list some of the things you have noticed
- ✂ remind your young person that talking about a problem can help
- ✂ acknowledge that talking about thoughts and feelings can be hard and sometimes scary
- ✂ reassure your young person. Let them know that you will be there for them and ask what they need from you (they might not know what they need)
- ✂ tell your young person that you are glad that they are talking to you.

Supporting good mental health

Good mental health supports young people to deal with the changes and challenges life throws at them, and to live their lives in a positive and meaningful way.

You can help your young person to achieve balance in their life by increasing their participation in activities that support their mental health. Just like looking after your physical health, looking after your mental health takes regular care and effort. There are lots of things that friends, and whānau can do to support a young person to look after their mental health.

Being a positive role model for your young person and doing things together is a really good way to help them look after their mental health. Here are some activities that you can encourage to support the mental health of your young person and to help them set up healthy habits for the future. Encourage your young person to:



- ✦ get good quality sleep by practicing good “sleep hygiene”. This means putting screens away 1-2 hours before bed, learning ways to relax before bed (such as mindfulness or breathing exercises), sticking to regular sleep and wake times and reducing the amount of alcohol and caffeine they use. The Mental Wealth website has more info on [how to get a good night’s sleep](#)
- ✦ eat well and drink plenty of water. Cook nutritious meals with your young person, eat mindfully, and encourage them to make healthy food choices
- ✦ stay active. Regular exercise can help your young person to sleep better and boost their mood. Go for a walk with your young person or encourage your young person to get involved in a team sport
- ✦ continue with activities that they enjoy and to connect with the people that they care about.

For other ideas on how to support the mental health of your young person go to www.mentalwealth.nz

Where to get help

You GP or family doctor can help recommend an approach for you and might also suggest antidepressant medications. Psychological talking therapy may also be recommended for treating depression.

If you're at school or uni, you may also be able to access a counselling or student wellbeing service.

You can also text or freephone 1737, New Zealand's free support service with qualified and confidential counsellors. Let them know what's going on for you or the person you are concerned about, and they can support you.



Other free helplines

Youthline	0800 376 633, free text 234, webchat at www.youthline.co.nz .
What's UP	0800 942 8787 - Advice & counselling support for 5-18-year olds; 12pm to 11pm.
Kidsline	0800 54 37 54 (0800 KIDSLINE) - Advice & counselling support up to 14 years; 4pm to 9pm weekdays.
Youth Law	0800 884529 (0800 UTHLAW) - Free legal help for children and young people.
OUTLine NZ	0800 688 5463 - Support for sexuality or gender identity issues.
Safe to talk	text 4334 or online chat to someone www.safetotalk.nz - Confidential advice for sexual harm issues.
Samaritans	0800 726 666 - Counselling advice and support.
Healthline	0800 611 116 - General health advice and information from a registered nurse.
Lifeline	0800 543 354 or text 'Help' to 4357 - Counselling advice and support.

Free online tools & info

 <p>Education & support to look after your mental health, with free web-chat 24/7.</p>	 <p>For when life sucks, Aunty Dee can help you solve your problems.</p>	 <p>E-therapy for young people who are feeling down, worried or stressed.</p>
 <p>Online community & support for young people.</p>	 <p>Culturally based tools to support Pacific young people to unleash their full potential.</p>	 <p>Support and advice for managing online safety.</p>
 <p>For whānau and friends to understand what young people go through.</p>	 <p>Support for young people experiencing depression or anxiety.</p>	 <p>A virtual distraction & self soothe kit.</p>
 <p>A step-by-step approach for working through anxiety & depression.</p>	 <p>Learn mindfulness to develop better wellbeing.</p>	 <p>Info & resources for queer & gender diverse youth.</p>

This factsheet was put together in collaboration with Headspace Australia (National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd).

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