

Video Games and Gaming

Like a stranger approaching a child at an arcade, traffickers often approach children online through video games, using the game to lure children into a power-and-control situation.

“Connecting with children through video games has become a common technique for predators,” says FBI Special Agent Kevin Kaufman. “Some predators eventually meet those kids in person, then trap them for trafficking purposes. They’re soliciting kids with video gaming cards, PayPal, sending them games in exchange for regular photos. And those progress to more risqué photos. Anywhere where people have access to the Internet and access to kids, some people are going to try to use it as a tool to lure kids out.”¹



According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, there are 750,000 predators online worldwide at any given moment. And in a recent NCMEC analysis of CyberTipline reports of online enticement, it was found that nearly all the children reported not knowing the predator other than from their online communication.²

AGAIN, WHERE CHILDREN PLAY, PREDATORS PREY.

ESPORTS AND LIVE-STREAMING

eSports is a form of competition that occurs online through video games. Most commonly, eSports is a structured, multiplayer game played individually, as teams, or professionally.

eSports has dramatically changed the culture of video games. Through live-streaming, these games have gained incredible momentum in our society. “Live-streaming” involves online streaming or broadcast of your screen. People can log on to watch you play these games. The benefit of this is some gamers who are good at these games can then gain backing, fans, and sponsorships, just like any other athlete.

Some of the best known eSports games include League of Legends, Call of Duty, DOTA, Super Smash Bros., and Fortnite Battle Royale.

These video games are played on consoles, while streaming with others online.

There are four basic classifications of eSports:

1. Multiplayer Online Battle Arena
2. Battle Royale Games
3. First-Person Shooter
4. Real-Time Strategy

Many eSports have dynamic chat features, enabling gamers to communicate with other gamers, and typically include group or individual settings. Consequently, in the course of game play, it’s common for players to chat with people they’ve never met. Initially, this feature was set up for players to communicate within the game. Unfortunately, as with any other form of communication, it can be abused.

POTENTIAL GROOMING VIA ESPORTS AND GAMING

Gaming has become a perfect place for traffickers to groom possible victims as a first step to enslaving them.

Because eSports represents potential fame to many youth and teens, the atmosphere can be especially competitive. If a young person is playing against friends or live-streaming a game, they’re thinking “This character should be his best. This character should have the best weapons the game has

to offer, the best armor, or the coolest-looking ‘skins’” (the graphic appearance of the character or avatar, which can be downloaded, purchased, or unlocked). To obtain these ideal character qualities, the player has to purchase packages or “loot boxes” offered through the game’s software. In addition to skins, loot boxes can include extra power-ups to make your character stronger, newer weapons to make your character

more powerful, etc. This desire for better features, combined with the risk from chat rooms, creates a breeding ground for traffickers.

After building relationships with young gamers (maybe after posing as a relatable young person, lying about their age, and hiding behind their screen), predators may offer to buy them loot boxes, or send in-game currency to show affection or companionship.

Once the trust is gained, the grooming begins. Online predators are then able to convince children to send a seemingly innocent photo of themselves in exchange for gifts. These gifts can take the form of gift cards or in-game packages.³

For example, Minecraft is a particularly popular game.

According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), its social capabilities have become a tool enabling the sexual abuse of children around the world. Sexual predators from North America to South Africa have contacted minors in their homes, convincing them to click links that route to child porn recruitment sites, and have subsequently recruited the children into various degrees of sexual abuse.⁴

NSPCC is a recommended resource with tips and advice for keeping children safe on Minecraft: www.nspcc.org.uk.

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN PLAY SAFE:⁵

1. Check the game's content and rating. Read about appropriate ages for each game at www.esrd.org.
2. Play your children's video games with your kids!
3. Remind them not to give out any information to anyone, whether they know them or not. Encourage them always to keep the conversation centered exclusively on the game if playing with strangers.
4. Set up parental controls; know how to mute, block, and report.
5. Talk to your children about games they may be watching on game-streaming sites. Keep the conversation ongoing!

WHAT ABOUT MONITORING YOUR CHILDREN'S DEVICES?

At present, chat and web play features can be turned on or off, but there is no parental control platform that will prevent a child from re-enabling these features once they've become reasonably savvy about navigating the software.

The chat logs can be monitored, but the means by which they are recovered is far too complicated for the average parent.

Still, you can take a number of measures⁶ to protect your kids including online protection tools and good old-fashioned monitoring.⁷ Parental control options vary by console. There are extensive resources on the Internet to explain how to enable parental controls. We recommend checking out the simple step-by-step guides developed by internetmatters.org.

We recommend internetmatters.org as a resource to access step-by-step instructions on how to set up parental controls on gaming consoles.

¹<https://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/human-traffickers-new-tool-to-lure-children-online-video-games-20190121/>

²<http://www.missingkids.com/theissues/onlineenticement>

³STOPP Website Staff. "Online Gaming: The Newest Weapon of Human Traffickers." *Human Trafficking*, 7 Dec. 2018, stopptrafficking.com/online-gaming-the-newest-weapon-of-human-traffickers-part-1/

⁴<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/minecraft-a-parents-guide/>

⁵Jenson, Kristen, and Vauna Davis. "7 Ways Predators and Porn Will Target Kids in 2019 - Be Prepared Not Scared!" *Protect Young Minds*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.protectyoungminds.org/2019/01/08/ways-predators-porn-target-kids-2019/

⁶<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/net-safety.html>

⁷"Change Your Child's Xbox Privacy and Online Safety Settings." Support.microsoft.com, Microsoft, 14 Feb. 2019, support.microsoft.com/en-us/help/4026796/microsoft-account-change-childs-xbox-privacy-online-safety-settings