

GET CONNECTED

a pixelkin guide to family gaming



pixelkin.org



[pixelkin](https://www.facebook.com/pixelkin)

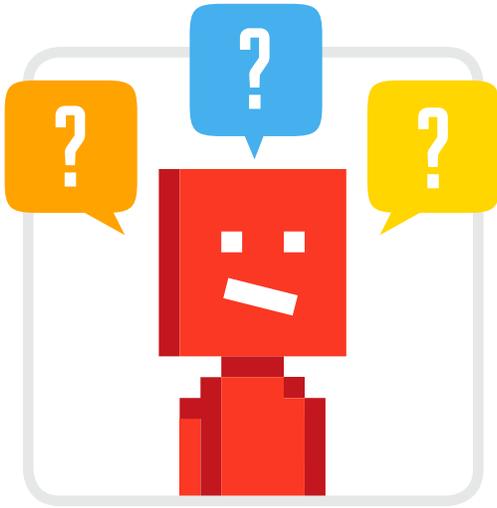


[pixelkin_org](https://twitter.com/pixelkin_org)



[pixelkinorg](https://www.youtube.com/pixelkinorg)

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?



Are you a mom or dad who has little or no experience with video games?



Are you confused about game ratings, platforms, or categories?



Do you have kids who love games and do you want to connect with them more?



If so, then this guide is for you!

CALM YOUR FEARS

GET THE FACTS

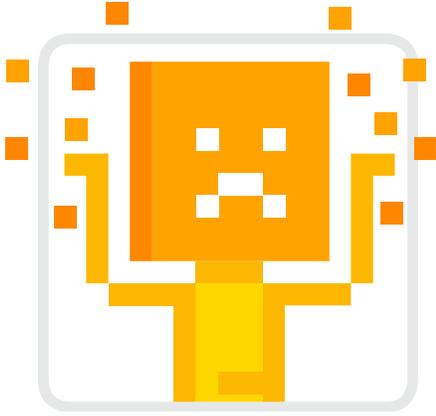
LEARN SOME LINGO

CONNECT WITH YOUR KIDS

PLAY AS A FAMILY

HAVE FUN!

WHY DID WE CREATE THIS GUIDE?



Like you, we saw video games playing an increasingly large role in kids' lives, and we had concerns about that.

So we decided to do something we probably should have done much sooner. We decided to sit, watch, and learn a little.

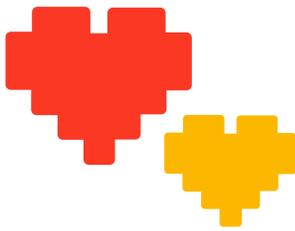
Here's what we discovered.

- Video games were a great way for us to connect with kids in a way that was *meaningful* to them.
- Video games allowed us to turn the tables on learning and allowed kids to share *their* passions with us.
- Video games created opportunities for us to think out loud with kids and *talk about important life issues*.
- Video games were actually *having a positive impact on kids'* mental health and self-esteem, and they offered up educational opportunities for them outside of school.
- Perhaps most importantly, video games gave us a way to have *lots of fun with the kids in our lives*.

What do we hope you'll discover? That gaming with your kids is fun—and that it's a great way to connect, engage, and learn as a family.

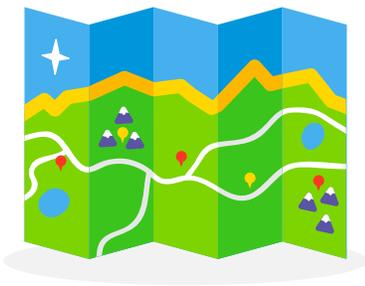
WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE?

We love games! So what you're getting here in "Get Connected" is a positive take on gaming—along with a review of recent research, some tips for getting into gaming, and a few ideas on how to weave gaming into your parenting toolkit.



1. WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT GAMING?

- Your kids are probably playing games.
- Gaming can be beneficial.
- It helps to see the bigger picture.
- Gaming can bring families together.



2. WHERE SHOULD YOU GO FROM HERE?

- Understand the machines (platforms)..... 10
- Understand the ratings..... 11
- Understand the game categories..... 14
- Ask your kids to play with you..... 16
- Choose great games..... 19

LET'S GET STARTED ▶▶▶



GAME POWER: Opening Doors

Keith Knight has MS and he's confined to a wheelchair, but he's a terrific League of Legends player. He operates his keyboard with a pen in his mouth, a modified mouse, and special switches he operates with his foot and elbow. After seeing Keith on his popular livestream on Twitch.tv, a fan created a Kickstarter to fund a documentary about Keith. (Sources: CNET, Kotaku, Kickstarter, and Keith's Facebook page.)

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT GAMING?

REASON #1. YOUR KIDS ARE PROBABLY PLAYING GAMES

ALMOST ALL TWEENS AND TEENS PLAY

97%
of teens ages 12-17 play computer, web, portable, or console games



99% boys
94% girls

50%
of teens played games "yesterday."



THEY PLAY MANY DIFFERENT WAYS

86%
of teens play on a console like the Xbox, PlayStation, or Wii

80%
of teens play five or more different types of games

60%
use a portable gaming device like a Sony PlayStation Vita, a Nintendo DS, or a Game Boy



48%
use a cell phone or other handheld device to play games

73%
play games on a desktop or a laptop computer

THEY GET SOCIAL WITH GAMING

65%
of game-playing teens play with other people who are in the room with them



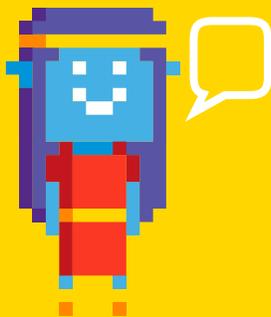
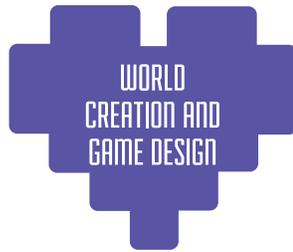
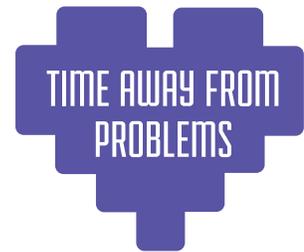
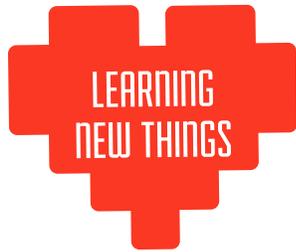
23%
of teens play with both friends and family known in the offline world and friends they met online



Source: 2008 Pew Research¹
Note: Because this research was done several years ago, the percentage of teens who currently game is likely higher than these numbers.

REASON #2. GAMING CAN BE BENEFICIAL

HERE'S A FEW REASONS WHY KIDS LOVE IT:

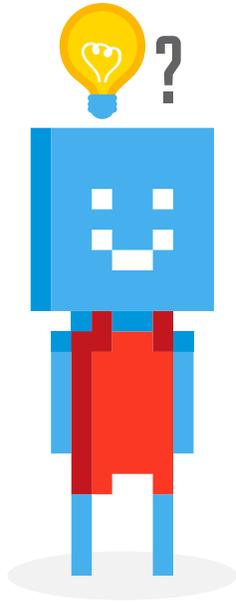


GAME POWER: Finding a Voice

Michael Mendoza is an autistic boy who enjoys interaction with his motion-controlled avatar. He's used motion-controlled video games like Kinect Adventure to practice his social skills and improve his coordination and balance. If you're unsure of yourself, an avatar that mimics your motions and repeats your words feels predictable and safe—it can really help you relax and practice. (Source: USA Today)

REASON #3. IT HELPS TO SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE

Chances are, your kids game. They may even be passionate about gaming. And it's up to you to monitor your kids' gaming. Here are some facts about gaming to help you be the best-informed parent on the block.



GETTING CREATIVE

Are you concerned that your kid is addicted to gaming? Some experts believe² pathological gaming can qualify as an official addiction, but others disagree.³ We think parents should monitor gaming time (along with time spent on other activities) and make sure kids are not gaming so much that it adversely affects the rest of their lives. However, parents should recognize that gaming is often an important part of kids' social lives—see “Getting Connected,” below. Parents should also know that sometimes when kids are in front of a screen, they're doing creative gaming-related activities such as connecting on fan sites, researching game strategy, or programming their own “mods” (one-of-a-kind game modifications).



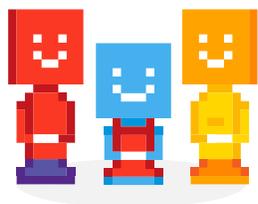
GETTING INFORMED

Do video games cause violence? Some studies⁴ have found a link between gaming and aggressive feelings, while other studies suggest video gaming helps people manage depression and their natural aggressive feelings.⁵ Most experts agree that no one has proven⁶ a causal link between gaming and violent behavior. One thing we can all agree on is that kids should not be exposed to violent games that are inappropriate for their age and level of development. To check whether games are appropriate for their kids, parents should refer to ESRB ratings, check out game reviews, try games ahead of time, or play games alongside their kids. (You should keep in mind that the ESRB system is different from TV and movie rating systems, and many games, even M-rated ones, are not as violent as primetime TV.)



GETTING PHYSICAL

Can video games harm your health? Yes, but they can also help improve your health. Reducing the time you sit in front of screens (playing video games, surfing the net, or watching videos) can help you stay active and healthy.² And regulating screentime can help you avoid muscle pain, repetitive stress injuries, and eye strain. On the other hand, games with motion sensors—sports games, exercise games, and dancing games, for example—can give you a good workout⁸ and motivate you to exercise. As with most activities, balance and moderation are important, and kids need special rules. By getting involved, you'll get a better handle on ways to monitor usage, emphasize the positive aspects of gaming, and maybe get a little more fit yourself.



GETTING CONNECTED

Some people prefer to play games alone, but gaming is an increasingly social pursuit:

- Many people play online games in which they make and keep friends⁹ for years.
- Some gamers use gaming as a way to spend time with distant family and friends.
- People with mobility issues¹⁰ can sometimes interact socially in a game environment¹¹ in ways they can't in real life.
- People with learning differences¹² such as autism can benefit from video games that teach social skills like facial recognition, planning, organizing, and self-monitoring.



GAME POWER: Giving Back

Gamer and dad Jeromy Adams started Extra Life to raise money for sick kids through videogaming marathons and tournaments. He observes that gamers are “some of the most socially connected people on earth.” And that makes them a super fundraising force for good. (Sources: E3 Interview on YouTube, Extra Life website)

REASON #4. GAMING CAN BRING FAMILIES TOGETHER

If your kids love games, harness the positive aspects of gaming and use games as an ally in your parenting.



Kids can teach you for a change.



You can model patience, persistence, and good sportsmanship.



You can solve puzzles together and practice being on the same side.



You can use the plots and characters in games to explore your family's values.



You can spend more time together.

GAME POWER: Help with Healing



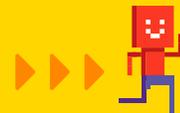
Steven Gonzalez founded The Survivor Games with his uncle after seeing the effect video games had on child cancer patients. For Gonzalez, who was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 12, games were a way to keep his mind healthy while his body healed. He has already made a game (Play Against Cancer), given a TED talk, and inspired cancer patients all over the country. (Source: Polygon)

WHERE SHOULD YOU GO FROM HERE?

Are you convinced that it's time to learn more about video games?
Are you considering trying gaming yourself?



Then let's explore the wonderful world of gaming



GAME POWER: A Passion for History

One of TEDx's latest talks comes from a very young participant—13-year-old Lewis Tachau. In his talk, Lewis explains how immersing himself in the World of Tanks video game taught him wartime strategy, tank history and design, and modern history. (Source: TEDx Talk)

STEP 1

UNDERSTAND THE MACHINES (A.K.A. PLATFORMS)

If someone in your family is already gaming on a console, a computer, or a handheld device, the question of which platform to play on may already be answered for you. But if you're just starting out and you're considering buying a system, check out this rundown on the most popular platforms.



CONSOLES & CONTROLLERS

Examples: Playstation, Nintendo Wii & Xbox

Advantages: Great for co-op gaming, controllers optimized for easy control, with motion capture, voice control, and other features available

Disadvantages: Expensive, takes up space



PERSONAL COMPUTERS

Examples: Apple & Windows computers

Advantages: Powerful, multipurpose, lots of titles available, good for online gaming

Disadvantages: Controls not necessarily optimized for gaming



MOBILE DEVICES

Examples: Android, iPhone & iPad

Advantages: Portable, multipurpose, good for casual gaming

Disadvantages: Less powerful & not optimized for gaming



HANDHELD CONSOLES

Examples: Nintendo 3DS, Gameboy & PlayStation Vita

Advantages: Portable, less expensive than full-sized consoles, screen included

Disadvantages: Less powerful than full-sized consoles or PCs, fewer titles available

Your choice of platform may be influenced by the games you want to play. Some games run only on particular platforms, while other games are available on multiple platforms.

STEP 2 UNDERSTAND THE RATINGS

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates video games. Virtually all video games sold in the U.S. and Canada are rated, even though rating is technically voluntary. Here's a typical rating breakdown.

RATING CATEGORY	CONTENT DESCRIPTION	INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS		
				

RATINGS CATEGORIES DEPEND ON

- how extreme the content is
- how often that extreme content occurs



EC (Early Childhood)
 Ages 3 and older
 Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate



T (Teen)
 Ages 13 and older
 May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language.



E (Everyone)
 Ages 6 and older
 May contain minimal cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language



M (Mature)
 Ages 17 and older
 May contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language



E10+ (Everyone 10+)
 Ages 10 and older
 May contain more cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence and/or minimal suggestive themes.



AO (Adults Only)
 Ages 18 and older
 May include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.



GAME POWER: Holding On

In Ryan Green's game, there is nothing to do but wait. After Green's young son was diagnosed with cancer, Green created That Dragon, Cancer as an exploration of what families go through during an illness. Green hopes the game will encourage "hope in dark places." (Source: Telegraph)

CONTENT DESCRIPTIONS

Content Descriptors look at the context of the game within the rating category assigned. This means “Suggestive Themes” might be a tad bit more suggestive in a T for Teen game than an E10+ for Ages 10 and Up game.

“These descriptions are applied relative to the Rating Category assigned and are not intended to be a complete listing of content. When a Content Descriptor is preceded by the term “Mild” it is intended to convey low frequency, intensity or severity.” —ESRB website

Alcohol Reference

Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages

Animated Blood

Discolored and/or unrealistic depictions of blood

Blood

Depictions of blood

Blood and Gore

Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts

Cartoon Violence

Violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted

Comic Mischief

Depictions or dialogue involving slapstick or suggestive humor

Crude Humor

Depictions or dialogue involving vulgar antics, including “bathroom” humor

Drug Reference

Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs

Fantasy Violence

Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life

Intense Violence

Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death

Language

Mild to moderate use of profanity

Lyrics

Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use in music

Mature Humor

Depictions or dialogue involving “adult” humor, including sexual references

Nudity

Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity

Partial Nudity

Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity

Real Gambling

Player can gamble, including betting or wagering real cash or currency

Sexual Content

Non-explicit depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including partial nudity

Sexual Themes

References to sex or sexuality

Sexual Violence

Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts

Simulated Gambling

Player can gamble without betting or wagering real cash or currency

Strong Language

Explicit and/or frequent use of profanity

Strong Lyrics

Explicit and/or frequent references to profanity, sex, violence, alcohol or drug use in music

Strong Sexual Content

Explicit and/or frequent depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity

Suggestive Themes

Mild provocative references or materials

Tobacco Reference

Reference to and/or images of tobacco products

Use of Alcohol

The consumption of alcoholic beverages

Use of Drugs

The consumption or use of illegal drugs

Use of Tobacco

The consumption of tobacco products

Violence

Scenes involving aggressive conflict. May contain bloodless dismemberment

Violent References

References to violent acts

INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS

Interactive Elements such as “Shares Location” and “Shares Info” are used mostly for mobile games and apps. “Users Interact” or “Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB” means that players might come into contact with other human beings (and some human beings are not so nice).

**Shares Info**

Indicates that personal information provided by the user (e.g., email address, phone number, credit card info, etc.) is shared with third parties

**Shares Location**

Includes the ability to display the user's location to other users of the app

**Users Interact**

Indicates possible exposure to unfiltered/uncensored user-generated content, including user-to-user communications and media sharing via social media and networks

Source: Entertainment Software Rating Board www.esrb.org

STEP 3 UNDERSTAND THE GAME CATEGORIES

Games come in all shapes and sizes. This helpful guide shows you how to match up the right categories for your kids' areas of interest, temperaments, and passions.



Simulation Games

Simulations emulate real-life environments and activities such as city-building, flying or driving, performing a particular task (such as surgery), or fighting a war.

Great for: Kids who are curious about how the world works, who like to build and create, and who like imaginative play.

Examples: Sim City (rated E to E10+), The Sims (rated T), Forza Motorsport (rated E)



Action-Adventure Games

Action-adventure games may combine exploration, puzzle-solving, fighting, and racing.

Great for: Adventurous kids who like exciting stories and enjoy a variety of gameplay mechanics.

Examples: The Legend of Zelda series (rated E to T), Assassin's Creed (rated T or M)

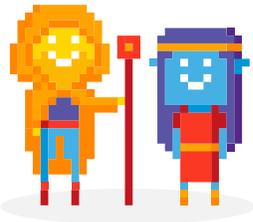


First-Person Shooters (FPS)

First-person shooters have shooting, of course, but may also include action-adventure elements like exploration, strategy, and stealth.

Great for: Improving cognitive functioning, learning skills, coordination, and even vision.

Examples: Call of Duty series (rated T or M), Portal (rated T), Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare (rated E10+)

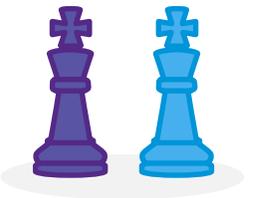


Role-playing Games (RPGs)

Role-playing games are story-focused and feature customizable characters.

Great for: Encouraging kids to think about what kind of people they want to be. You can use RPGs to explore values and build empathy.

Examples: The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim (rated M), Final Fantasy series (rated E10+ to T), Shin Megami Tensei: Persona (rated M)



Strategy Games

Strategy games often feature a top-down perspective and put the player in charge of managing resources and units.

Great for: Kids who are interested in history, economics, and politics.

Examples: Starcraft (rated T), Civilization (rated E10+)

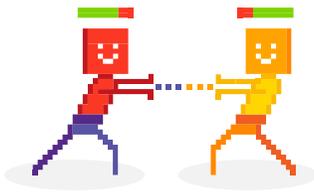


Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs)

Massively multiplayer online games are played online and players participate in the game alongside other players from all over the world.

Great for: Practicing social skills, organizational skills, and leadership skills. Complicated quests and dungeons encourage reading, study, and networking with other players. Lots of MMO players meet lifelong friends in their games.

Examples: World of Warcraft (rated T), League of Legends (rated T)



Fighting Games

Fighting games (“fighters”) pit two or more characters against each other, often in hand-to-hand combat.

Great for: Building coordination, persistence, patience, and confidence.

Examples: Super Smash Bros. (rated E to T), Marvel vs. Capcom (rated T)

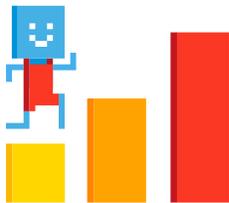


Stealth & Survival Games

Stealth and survival games feature sneaking past enemies, escaping from pursuers, and sometimes attacking enemies. Survival horror games often incorporate stealth. These games can be very scary!

Great for: Older kids who enjoy horror books and movies, superhero sagas, and spy novels.

Examples: Dishonored (rated M), Thief (rated M)

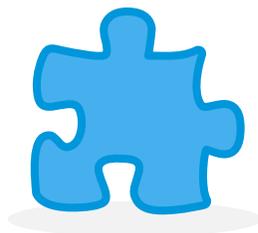


Platformer Games

Platformer games feature a series of environments with obstacles and objectives; the player guides a character through the obstacles.

Great for: Light-hearted group play and friendly competition. They build hand-eye coordination, patience, and persistence.

Examples: Super Mario 3D World (rated E), Tearaway (rated E), LittleBigPlanet (rated E)



Puzzle Games

Puzzle games incorporate various kinds of puzzles and riddles in the gameplay. Games in other categories sometimes include puzzle elements or levels.

Great for: Stretching your ability to apply logic to a problem and stick with it until you solve it. Many games incorporate puzzles as part of the fun.

Examples: The Legend of Zelda series (rated E to T), Tetris (rated E), Candy Crush (rated E)

STEP 4 ASK YOUR KIDS TO PLAY WITH YOU

If your kids already have games they like to play, sit down beside them, watch for a while, and ask questions:

What do you like about this game?

What have you discovered in this game?

How did you figure out how to do that?

What's going on in this game right now?

Why did you choose to push that button?

What's going to happen now?

May I have a turn?

CHECK IT OUT

"Let's Play Videos & Walkthroughs"



Let's Play videos are posted by gamers who play a game and post their gaming sessions on YouTube. What you see and hear is their actual gameplay—what they see on the screen as they play, where they go, and what they do. As they play, they describe what they're doing and why. By watching someone else play a game, you can learn to do it yourself. Let's Plays are a great tool when you're stuck and can't figure out how to progress. And—bonus!—sometimes they're really entertaining, too. To find Let's Plays, just search for "Let's Play <name of game>." You should find lots of videos to choose from. You should know that some Let's Players use adult language; it sometimes works just fine to watch these videos on mute. Alternatively, you can search for text and video walkthroughs, which don't generally contain bad language. IGN is a good resource for those.

IF YOU WANT TO FIND A NEW GAME TO PLAY WITH YOUR KIDS:



Research the game first. If you already have a gaming platform (for example, PlayStation 4 or Nintendo Wii U) make sure you're buying a game that runs on that platform. Know the ESRB rating, but go beyond the rating to make sure the game won't be too violent, scary, or hard. And be prepared to talk about gender and cultural stereotypes.



Ask your kids to help you figure out how to play.



Model good sportsmanship by taking turns, being persistent, and winning and losing gracefully.



Regulate screentime and model self control by taking lots of breaks.

On **Pixelkin.org** you'll find an excellent Library that provides an overview for most of today's popular games. Each review features gameplay ideas, ratings, trailers, a suggested discussion guide, and a whole lot more. It's a fabulous resource for any parent. If you want to know about a game that's not in the Library, reach out to our Game Team at **hello@pixelkin.org** and we'll be glad to help you out.

HOW TO APPROACH YOUR GAMING TWEEN OR TEEN

If you have older kids, they may have developed gaming habits and opinions without you. But that doesn't mean you can't ask questions and begin to participate. This approach to connecting with your kids can have a huge impact on their self esteem and confidence. It's their chance to show you something they're really good at.

We suggest sitting down and letting them show you how to play, if they're up for it. Here are some tips to help make gaming sessions go a little more smoothly.



Take the initiative and ask if you can play together. Your kids might be dying to ask you to play but lack the words to show it.



Be sensitive to individual preferences. Some teens think of their games as their own space, and pushing too hard is not a good idea.



Try to keep an open mind about their games. Even if you think the game your kid likes might be too violent, give it a chance.



You shouldn't necessarily assume that M-rated games are automatically off limits, especially for older teens. But be sure to talk about the issues that concern you, such as the ideas presented in the game and how important questions are dealt with. If you try hard and you really don't like a game, ask your kids to help you find a game you can enjoy together.



Don't shy away from gaming with girls. Be sure to discuss gender stereotyping.



Be a guardian. Studies show that gaming with kids is good for parents and kids.¹³ The best way to deal with some of the controversial aspects of gaming is to be there with them should issues arise.



Get your kids to teach you, and don't give up. Games take some time to learn, just like any activity. You can do it!



Be optimistic, have fun, and enjoy yourself. You might find yourself enjoying a hobby you never imagined you'd like.



GAME POWER: A Sphere of Influence

Felicia Day is a gamer, actress, writer, producer, innovator, and entrepreneur who has sometimes used her platform to stand up for gamers (especially women who game) and to fight gender stereotyping in games. Although she's one of the busiest people on the planet, she manages to balance an active gaming life with everything else she does—and she speaks frankly about the challenges. (Sources: Geek and Sundry, Feliciaday.com)

STEP 5

CHOOSE GREAT GAMES FOR YOUR KIDS OR YOURSELF

With so many games available out there, it can be hard to know how to find the right games for your kids and yourself. We usually start by looking at games that seem to fit the ages and maturity levels of the kids. After that we confirm the platform, check the ratings, ask around, and read a few reviews.

To help make things a little easier, we've made a list of terrific games that you can play together. Our list is organized based on maturity level and interest. These games are among the most popular around so you can rest assured they're tried, tested, and true.

We advise checking the ESRB ratings and using them as guidelines. Every kid is different, and some young kids may be frightened by content that doesn't bother other kids at all. Conversely, some teens may be able to handle certain M-rated games—especially if you're there to discuss the content with them.

Note: Some games are played online and have multiplayer modes where kids may meet and interact with other players. (You can check the ESRB rating labels; the "Users Interact" label identifies these games.) Whenever your kids play an online game with others, it's a good idea to play with them, watch them play, and/or spotcheck their play. That way you can help them learn to deal with any uncomfortable or unwanted interactions.



GAME POWER: Kid-Centric Classroom

Gamer and teacher Lucas Gillispie uses Minecraft and World of Warcraft to motivate his students and teach them about leadership and improve math and literacy skills. After playing with his students and using the games as gateways for learning, Lucas and his colleagues created a free games-in-the-classroom curriculum for other teachers to download and use.

Sources: (Lucas Gillispie, Edurealms)

YOUNG KIDS +

JUST DANCE KIDS 2014



Just Dance Kids 2014 is a motion-controlled dancing game. The songs and professionally choreographed dances are designed to be appropriate for—and appealing to—kids of all ages as well as adults.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Xbox 360 and Xbox One, Wii, and Wii U

What we like about it: Several people can play at once. There are 40 songs, including traditional kids' songs like "Pop Goes the Weasel," songs from kids' TV shows, and pop hits. You can use a playlist or shuffle mode so kids can keep going on their own. The game works for even the youngest kids, but there are dances and songs that challenge older kids. In the Xbox version, you can earn accomplishments (from a list of 46) that are as varied as dancing a total of 10 times, dancing to three songs containing a raccoon, and creating your own dance. The Wii U version lets one player be the leader who sends other players dance suggestions through the Wii U GamePad.

Source: Microsoft Studios

ZOO TYCOON



Zoo Tycoon is a zoo simulation game that includes more than 100 animals and a variety of environments.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Xbox 360 and Xbox One

What we like about it: This game is beautiful, charming, and entertaining. You build your zoo and fill it with animals. You can play in omniscient mode or use your zoo tycoon avatar to wander around the zoo you've made, interacting with the animals. In the Xbox One version, you can collaborate over Xbox Live with up to three other tycoons and post information about your zoo. Using the Kinect, you can feed and wash the animals and they'll recognize you and copy your expressions. The game subtly teaches you about animals and conservation.

Source: Microsoft Studios

MARIO KART



The Mario Kart racing game series is fast-paced, colorful, exciting, competitive, and great for all ages. It's fun for single and multiple players alike, making it a good option for family game nights.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Most Nintendo consoles

What we like about it: Mario Kart has complex items and a chaotic, speedy feel, but at its heart it is a very simple game. This makes it great for beginners and experts alike. Mario Kart has something for everyone, which makes it the perfect game to share. Mario Kart DS and Mario Kart 7 are a little harder to share, though, because they are played on handheld devices.

Source: Nintendo, Inc.

MINECRAFT



Minecraft is a creative open-world game with fantasy elements. Although Minecraft is rated E 10+ we think parents should evaluate whether the mild cartoon violence may be okay for slightly younger kids.

Rating: E 10+

Platforms: PC, Mac, iOS, Android, Xbox 360 and Xbox One, PlayStation 3 and 4, PlayStation Vita

What we like about it: Its super-blocky, pixelated graphics make it look like a children's game, but people of all ages enjoy Minecraft for its unique take on exploration and crafting. It can be played alone or online with multiplayer mode. If kids are playing online, you should monitor to make sure they're not running into inappropriate language or behavior, or you can sign up for a special monitored server created especially for kids. The game focuses on exploring huge worlds, finding resources, and building structures. It's been widely used as an educational tool.

Source: Mojang

ANIMAL CROSSING



The Animal Crossing games are a series of open-ended simulations. The player takes the role of a human in a village of animals. In this peaceful environment, players may garden, catch fish, pay their mortgage, and do various tasks for the cute animal villagers.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Nintendo GameCube, Nintendo Wii, Nintendo 3DS

What we like about it: Like other good simulations, Animal Crossing manages to create its own little world. It's a cheerful place to explore. The world is persistent, which means things happen even when you're not there. There are special seasonal events, characters with entertaining personalities, and lots of options for dressing up, building, decorating, and so on. In the latest game in the series (Animal Crossing: New Leaf), players can meet up online and play minigames together.

Source: Nintendo, Inc.

TWEENS +

POKEMON X & Y



Pokémon is a beloved franchise that sets players on a cross-country journey to capture as many magical Pokémon as they can.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Nintendo 3DS

What we like about it: Players have always grown attached to their Pokémon, and Pokémon X and Y acknowledge this, adding the ability to pet, play with, and care for the Pokémon. The idea of going on an adventure and collecting magical creatures has universal, long-lasting appeal. Every generation of kids should have a generation of Pokémon to grow up with.

Source: Nintendo, Inc.

LITTLEBIGPLANET 2



LittleBigPlanet is a puzzle platformer starring one of the most adorable and mischievous game characters ever: Sackboy. Players go through complicated levels that challenge anyone's creativity. They can also create their own levels!

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: PlayStation 3

What we like about it: LittleBigPlanet is insanely fun, and it's one of the best multiplayer games out there. Additional players can jump in at any time. There's lots of strange, quirky humor in the LBP games that make them appealing to just about everyone. These games endure because they don't just use running and jumping—they make you grab and drag objects, hang onto moving pieces, and generally wreak havoc with your cute little sack person.

Source: Media Molecule

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD



The Super Mario games are puzzle platformers that challenge and entertain gamers of all ages. Because of their open, explorable worlds and satisfying game mechanics, anyone can have fun hunting for stars and defeating the evil King Bowser. Super Mario 3D World is the latest game in the series.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Nintendo Wii U

What we like about it: Super Mario 3D World is particularly enjoyable for multiplayer gaming, because it's super easy for extra players to jump in or jump out throughout the course of the gameplay. So, if someone arrives late or has to get up to answer the phone, the game doesn't come to a halt. Additionally, it's colorful, fun, energetic, and extremely satisfying for all ages.

Source: Nintendo, Inc.

JUST DANCE 2014



Just Dance is the quintessential dance game. New versions with fresh songs and dances are released all the time, and anyone can enjoy themselves following along to these fun moves. Look for the newest version, or rock out with any of the old ones—they're solid.

Rating: E10 +

Platforms: Wii, Wii U, Playstation 3 and 4, Xbox 360 and Xbox One

What we like about it: Like Just Dance Kids, Just Dance is an easy way to get up and moving. It's a perfect addition to a party (for kids or adults; we dare you to try it), allowing up to six players on the Xbox One version. As a bonus, if you have a microphone that hooks up to your console, you can use it as a karaoke game too! If you have less confident players, they can dance as backup while one person takes the lead role. There are so many ways to play, it's hard to list them all!

Source: Ubisoft

LEGO MARVEL SUPERHEROES



The Lego games are fun, colorful adaptations of movies that your kids already love (check out Lego The Hobbit or Lego Star Wars if you're interested). Lego Marvel Superheroes lets you control over 100 Marvel characters in superpowered adventures.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: PC, Nintendo DS and 3DS, PlayStation 3 and 4, PlayStation Vita, Wii U, Xbox 360 and Xbox One

What we like about it: It's incredibly cool to try out all the different superpowers in the game. Aside from that, Lego Marvel Superheroes has a cute and quirky sense of humor, and the gameplay is simple and fun. It also allows two players at a time, so you can join in!

Source: Lego.com

TEARAWAY



Tearaway is an innovative platforming game. In Tearaway, the player helps a tiny messenger named Iota or Atoi journey to deliver a message. The game uses multiple touchpads and cameras to give players extensive control over the game world.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Playstation Vita

What we like about it: Tearaway encourages players to be creative. It uses an in-game camera (complete with Instagram-style filters) and a virtual crafting table that lets players make all kinds of accessories for the main character. It's a game that effortlessly pulls players into the game world—and pulls the game world into the real world by providing free downloadable plans to make your favorite characters out of paper.

Source: Media Molecule

LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK BETWEEN WORLDS



The Legend of Zelda series provides an excellent combination of exciting adventures, challenging puzzles, and meaningful stories. A Link Between Worlds is no different.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Nintendo 3DS

What we like about it: In addition to providing more freedom than most Zelda games, Link Between Worlds also has the new mechanic of allowing the main character to turn into a 2D painting at will, giving him a clever advantage over his environment. This mechanic is perfect for getting kids to think differently about tricky situations and to approach problems with multiple solutions.

Source: Nintendo, Inc.

MADDEN NFL 25



The Madden series lets football fans control their own teams, from the players to the uniform colors to the price of the food in the stadium.

Rating: E10 +

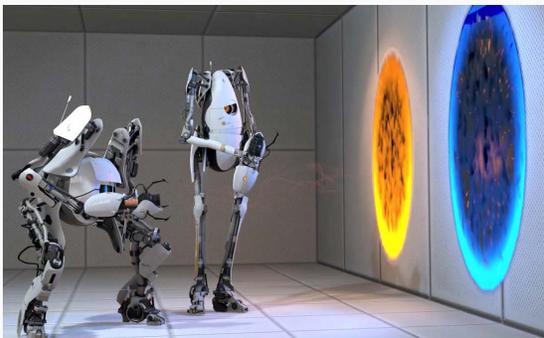
Platforms: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Xbox One, PlayStation 4

What we like about it: Madden doesn't do much new with each successive game, but it's a tried-and-true staple of sports games. Madden is fun to play alone on career mode, but you can also play against other players—which makes it a great opportunity to play with your kids.

Source: EA Sports

YOUNGER TEENS +

PORTAL 2



Portal and Portal 2 put a brilliant spin on classic first-person shooter gameplay by equipping you not with a weapon, but with the portal gun, which allows for instantaneous transport across long distances. The games

are incredibly tricky puzzlers with a dark and entertaining backstory.

Rating: E10+

Platforms: PC, Mac, Xbox 360, Playstation 3

What we like about it: The portal gun allows for some extremely cool puzzles, all of which twist your thinking in positive and exciting ways. The second Portal game is more family friendly than the first, both because of its lower rating and because of its extremely entertaining multiplayer mode.

Source: Valve Corp.

JOURNEY



Journey is a short but sweet adventure game with simple mechanics. Players navigate the ruins of a desert world while trying to rescue Scarf Creatures and find out what happened to the people who once lived there. It's also possible to play with an anonymous second player, but there's no chat function.

Rating: E for Everyone

Platforms: Playstation 3

What we like about it: Journey is an adventure game with no fighting, but it never feels dull or too easy. It tells an evocative story that will get kids (and adults) thinking, and the art and music are absolutely gorgeous. We highly recommend it for gamers of any age, but slightly older players might get more out of it.

Source: Thatgamecompany, Sony Computer Entertainment

BROKEN AGE



Broken Age is a puzzle adventure game featuring double protagonists whose separate stories eventually collide. Part sci-fi, part fantasy, and part humor, Broken Age tells the story of two teenagers who must, each in their own way, break free from the expectations and barriers their settings have placed on them. The game

features a fantastic cast of voice actors and a beautiful art style.

Rating: NR (Not Yet Rated)

Platforms: PC, Mac

What we like about it: Broken Age is a wonderful coming-of-age story for teens, and despite its simplistic style and gameplay, it asks some fairly deep questions of its players. It is accessible to all ages—the game is fun, light-hearted, and creative, and contains only a cartoon level of violence and no rough language. We recommend good reading comprehension, however.

Source: Doublefine

BASTION



Bastion is an adventure RPG with gorgeous music and art design. The story is narrated from a third-person perspective as the main character, a kid referred to only as “The Kid,” tries to repair a damaged fantasy world after a cataclysmic event.

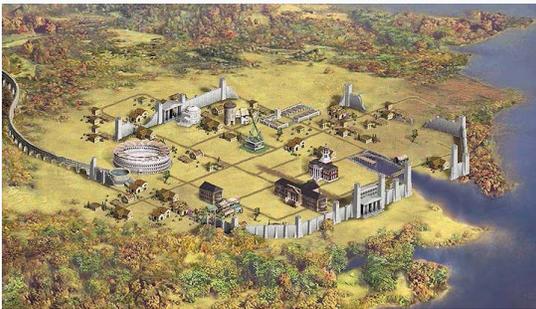
Rating: E10 +

Platforms: PC, Mac, Xbox 360, iOS

What we like about it: Although the game features fighting as a primary mechanic, the message is anti-violence, and the art design is inspiring and creative. The story delves into some deep questions related to oppression and privilege. Bastion is, however, easy to digest, and older kids and teens shouldn't have any trouble understanding its themes.

Source: Supergiant Games

CIVILIZATION



The Civilization games are a series of historical turn-based strategy games (one player makes a move, then the other player—or the computer—takes a turn). Players choose a civilization to start with, such as the Egyptians, the British, or the Japanese, and play to gain control and agency. This can mean economic control, military prowess, or strategic alliance-building, though usually all three are combined.

Rating: E10 +

Platforms: PC, Mac

What we like about it: The Civilization series is a good introduction to world history (particularly Western European history, though it delves into others). Although not necessarily historically accurate, the games can give some context to history learners and engage their interest early on. Strategy games are also a good way to engage the brain in general.

Source: Firaxis Games, Aspyr

WORLD OF WARCRAFT



World of Warcraft is a very popular MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) set in a high fantasy world where warring factions fight for dominance. Players can join guilds and visit dungeons together, or they can go on quests individually

Rating: T for Teen

Platforms: PC, Mac

What we like about it: Its vibrant, animated atmosphere makes it a good choice for younger teens. There are also messages of environmentalism and pacifism.

Source: Firaxis Games, Aspyr

OLDER TEENS AND ADULTS

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV



Rating: M for Mature

Assassin's Creed IV has been affectionately called a "pirate simulator." Players take the role of a pirate Assassin (one of an ancient order of Assassins based on the real-world Hashishin) named Edward Kenway.

Platforms: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Wii U

What we like about it: Assassin's Creed is a great series that encourages exploration. There's a lot of fighting, but there are also stealth and puzzle elements. The games each take place in a unique historical setting: ACIV takes place in the Caribbean in the 18th century. It's really complex; players manage resources and take care of their ships as they explore the huge open world.

Source: Ubisoft

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA



The Persona series consists of several games featuring different teenage characters and stories. They are categorized as dark supernatural RPGs. They often involve murder mysteries and coming-of-age metaphors. Characters each have a “Persona,” a version of themselves they can bring out in order to fight demons.

Rating: M for Mature

Platforms: PlayStation Vita, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, PlayStation, PlayStation Portable, Xbox 360, 3DS

What we like about it: Despite some very mature content, the Persona series is a fantastic metaphor for typical teenage struggles—identity, sexuality, gender, romance, and friendship. The games may also introduce teens to a different cultural setting and storytelling style.

Source: Atlus

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED ANNIVERSARY



The Halo series is a sci-fi first-person shooter with complex themes of warfare, loyalty, betrayal, and religion. The series stars Master Chief, a quiet and thoughtful supersoldier who can always be trusted to get the job done.

Rating: M for Mature

Platforms: Xbox 360

What we like about it: Though Halo is quite violent, it has a strong and complex story arc which provides ample opportunity for important discussion with teens. The plot is very complicated and arches over multiple games. This re-release of the original Halo: Combat Evolved is a good place to start.

Source: 343 Industries

THE ELDER SCROLLS: SKYRIM



Skyrim is one of the latest installments in the Elder Scrolls series of high fantasy RPGs. Set in the wintery Nordic reaches of the fictional Elder Scrolls world, Skyrim features a customizable protagonist who must battle dragons and choose sides in an ongoing human conflict between those who would

remain with the Empire and those who wish Skyrim to become its own country.

Rating: M for Mature

Platforms: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3

What we like about it: Although Skyrim is rated M, the gameplay is very customizable, and with parental guidance, kids of almost any age might have fun with it. Fighting is one element of gameplay, but alchemy, blacksmithing, mining, horseback riding, cooking, and hunting are also present. The graphics are extraordinarily beautiful, so some players enjoy simply wandering around the world.

Source: Bethesda Game Studios

PLAYER 1



HP 160/200

GAME POWER: Saving Lives

Dr. Olajide Williams knew that kids living with older guardians might need to deal with medical emergencies. He made a game that teaches kids to identify the symptoms of a stroke, and proved that the knowledge kids got from the game stuck with them long-term. This could be a big step in using games for education—and definitely good news for families. (Source: Polygon)



WANT MORE IDEAS?

Give us a shout at hello@pixelkin.org or check out Pixelkin.org for the most up-to-date news and reviews on current games.



GAME POWER: Rising Up

Gloria O'Neill is a champion for video game portrayal of Native Americans and First Peoples. Tired of clichéd representation, she created a game company owned by indigenous people. She is determined to make games that go beyond the stereotypes, to inspire, and to represent indigenous people all over the world. (Source: Polygon)

As games get more popular, there's lots of information swirling around out there. It's hard to stay on top of the latest news. That's where we come in. While we're decidedly passionate about gaming, our goal is to bring a balanced view to families in hopes of helping them make informed choices about family gaming.



THE LATEST RESEARCH

Pixelkin keeps up with research studies on gaming. We keep current and evaluate the scientists, studies, and methodologies, and we strive to present the best, most current research available.



GAME LIBRARY

Pixelkin's Game Library keeps you up to date on the big names in video games. We don't cover everything, but we cover what parents are talking about and what kids are playing. In the Library you'll read about ratings, content (how violent is the game? what's it about?), themes, and tips for talking about games with your kids.

Is there a game you'd like included in the Library?

Contact us and let us know! We're always working on it.



GAME POWER: The Strength to Overcome

Stephen Machuga is a war veteran who singlehandedly organized a charity effort to get video games to soldiers overseas. After realizing how much gaming helped him readjust after returning from Iraq, Machuga has devoted himself to putting together hundreds of care packages destined for Iraq and Afghanistan. (Source: Polygon)



GAME REVIEWS

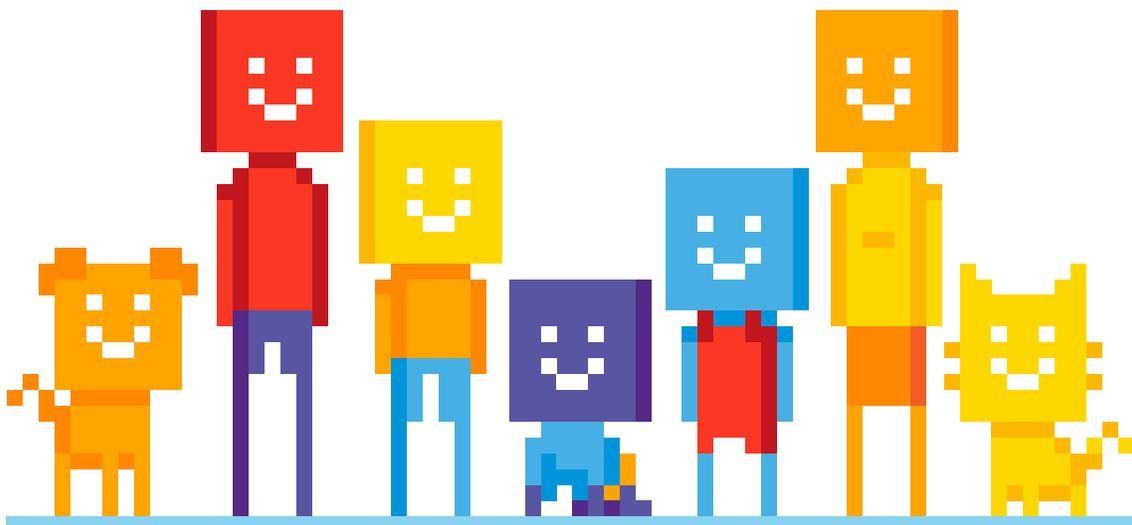
When a new game comes out, we post an article about it on Pixelkin. We cover the basics—what the game’s about and what critics are saying about its quality. And we focus on facts parents need to know about new games—things like ratings, themes, and cautions. Some of our reviews even include discussion ideas and gameplay tips.

GAMING DICTIONARY

Pixelkin’s Dictionary has a comprehensive list of terms related to gaming. If you run into terms that aren’t in the Dictionary yet, please send a note to us at hello@pixelkin.org.

LET US HELP!

At Pixelkin, we think playing video games with your family is so great, we’re thrilled to help you get started. Send your questions and comments to hello@pixelkin.org and we’ll do our best to help you get connected through gaming.



STAY IN THE LOOP!



Want up-to-date info?
Make a run for our website and sign up for our Newsletter.

REFERENCES

- 1 Amanda Lenhart, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, Alexandra Macgill, Chris Evans, and Jessica Vitak, "Teens, Video Games, and Civics," Pew Research Internet Project, September 16, 2008, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2008/09/16/teensvideogamesandcivics/>.
- 2 Tracy Miller, "Video game addiction and other Internet compulsive disorders mask depression, anxiety, learning disabilities," New York Daily News, March 25, 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/lifestyle/health/kidsaddictedvideogamesviolentexperts/article1.1298338>.
- 3 Todd Essig, "Is Pathological Video Gaming Failed Solution Or An Addiction?" Forbes, May 31, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/toddesig/2012/05/31ispathologicalvideogamingafailedsolutionoranaddiction/>.
- 4 "Violent Video Games May Increase Aggression in Some But Not Others, Says New Research," American Psychological Association, June 7, 2010, <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/06/violentvideogames.aspx>.
- 5 Cheryl K. Olson, "Children's Motivations for Video Game Play in the Context of Normal Development," Review of General Psychology, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 2, 180187, <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/gpr142180.pdf>.
- 6 Judith Levine, "Only a Game: Why Censoring New Media Won't Stop Gun Violence," Media Coalition, 2013, <http://mediacoalition.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/06/OnlyAGame.pdf>.
- 7 "Less TV, Fewer Videos Help Keep Weight in Check," We Can! Community News Feature on National Institutes of Health website, February 13, 2013, <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/news-events/matte3.htm>.
- 8 "Fun and exergames: Not just for kids anymore," Harvard Health Publications, March 2012, http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Heart_Letter/2012/March/funandexergamesnotjustforkidsanymore.
- 9 Elizabeth Gudrais, "Networked," Harvard Magazine, May-June 2010, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2010/05/networked>.
- 10 Andrew Ross, "Breakfast Topic: WoW as rehab," WoW Insider, August 7, 2010, <http://wow.joystiq.com/2010/08/07/breakfasttopicwowasrehab/>.
- 11 The Able Gamers Foundation website. <http://www.ablegamers.com/aboutus>
- 12 Rick Nauert, PhD., "Video Games May Enhance Social Skills for Autistic Youth," PsychCentral, September 6, 2012, <http://psychcentral.com/news/2012/09/06/videogamesmayenhancesocialskillsforautisticyouth/44256.html>.
- 13 Jordan Shapiro, "Research Says Parents And Kids Should Play Video Games Together," Forbes, December 4, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanshapiro/2013/12/04/researchsaysparen>