Social online games for children and families

Fostering lifelong connections

Playing online games as a family

Playing games has long brought families and friends together. Many digital games nowadays have a social component that can assist children with maintaining connections with their friends, siblings and relatives, even when they are not in the same room or household. In the time of COVID-19 and beyond, online games can be a productive social activity for children and young people and support the development or maintenance of their relationships with friends, family and carers.

Online and virtual games may seem daunting to parents and carers because of concerns about children's online safety and excessive amounts of 'screen time'. However, it is important to remember that games and play can provide great opportunities for children to learn skills like coordination, collaboration and creativity. When played with friends and family, children are also given an opportunity to bond and socialise. When supplemented with traditional and face-to-face family games and playdates, screen time through online games can be a positive and productive experience for all involved.

Tips for protecting children's safety online

- **Check privacy and safety settings** — Activate parental controls and safety features on the device, app or browser. These controls can help restrict children's access to certain content, public users and limit spending on in-game and in-app purchases. Privacy settings can also help limit who is able to see when children are online and who they can play or chat with.

- **Know who children are playing with** — Always assist children with adding friends and family members to in-game 'friends lists'. Each game will have instructions about how to do this. Parents and carers can also regularly monitor friends lists to ensure contacts are only people who are known to children. Talk regularly with children about who they are playing with online.

- **Set up virtual play dates** — Scheduling a time for children to have a virtual play date with friends, siblings or other family members can assist to manage screen time while emphasising the social nature and purpose of playing the online game. Pick a time when you are available to supervise the virtual play date and offer your assistance.

- **Create safe usernames** — Where games require a screen name or username, assist children to create ones that do not identify them. Screen names and usernames should never include a child's full name, address, school, date of birth or phone number.

Guidelines for online games with children

Check age guidelines — You can check the age classification for most online games when you download or purchase it and on the [Australian Classification Board's](#) public database. If you are still unsure or would like further information about the game, consult reputable organisations such as [Common Sense Media](#) and the [Australian Council on Children and the Media](#) for expert and parent reviews of games. These reviews can often provide useful information about games that are based on the experiences of parents and their children, and the knowledge and research of experts.

Stay involved and empower children — Talk regularly with children about important e-safety topics to build their understanding and confidence. Have regular conversations with children about how they can protect their privacy online, avoid strangers, malware and suspicious links, block and report other users, and manage online bullying. It is important to tell children to notify you immediately if a stranger tries to start a conversation about something inappropriate or requests personal information, or if they experience any cyberbullying.

April 2020

While there are many online and interactive games available to suit a range of ages, skill levels, and technologies, we provide here suggestions for 10 simple child- and family-friendly games. Tips for how parents and carers can keep children safe when gaming online are also provided.

1. Animal Crossing – Pocket Camp

Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp is a mobile game for smartphones released by Nintendo from its Animal Crossing video game series. Pocket Camp is a G-rated, community-oriented role-playing game where players are tasked with building a thriving society. In Pocket Camp, players customise and decorate their campsite and gather materials such as wood and cotton to trade for furniture. Players can be visited by neighbouring animal characters as well as real-life friends or family they invite through an 11-digit Friend Code. The game is whimsical and played at a relaxed pace. There are no high scores, violence or evil villains. It has wide appeal with children and adults alike because of its attainable goals and calming aesthetic and music.

The latest game in the Animal Crossing series, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, has more social and interactive online elements and requires a Nintendo Switch gaming console. Since its release in late March 2020, it has been celebrated for its ability to provide comfort and social connection during isolating and stressful times.

The Pocket Camp app is free to start (with in-app purchases available). A smartphone and internet connection are needed to play. Pocket Camp is rated for players aged 4 years or older however, it may be more suitable for players 8 years or older because of more complex features, including text boxes for instructions and interactions.

Summary

Recommended age: 8+

Cost: Free; in-app purchases available

Technology needed: Smartphone (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

2. Lego Life

LEGO Life is a creative and social online community app where children can share their real-life or online LEGO creations, get inspired, and engage with other children and family members in a child-safe platform. With LEGO Life, children can build themselves as a LEGO Minifigure and customise their profile with a safe and anonymous username, browse creations from other LEGO Lifers, take on LEGO building challenges, and safely upload photos of their creations using a one-off account verification by a parent.

The LEGO Life app was designed with children's online wellbeing and safety in mind. For example, there's a character in the app called Captain Safety who often pops up to remind children to *"Be kind - stay positive, avoid words that can hurt others"* and other messages that emphasise respect and kindness.

LEGO Life app is free to download with no third-party advertising or in-app purchases, although LEGO products are heavily promoted within the app. The LEGO Life app is rated for children aged 4 and over; however, parental guidance for children under the age of 9 is recommended due to the social media features of the app which may put younger children under pressure to seek 'likes' or receive 'comments' on their LEGO creations.
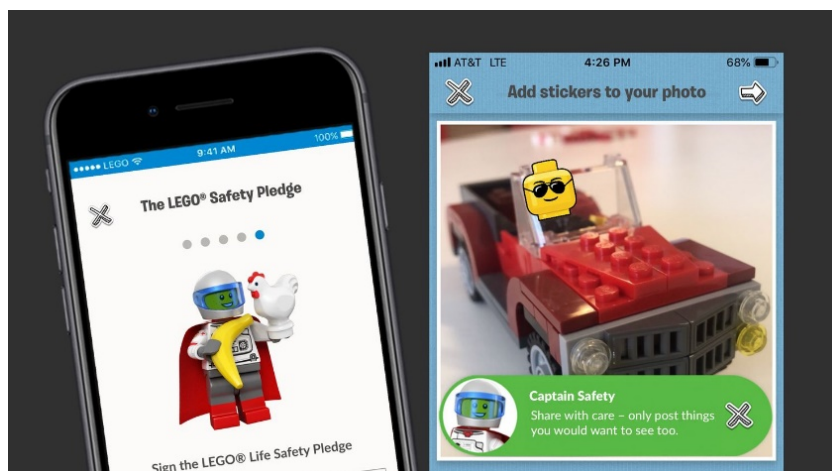
Summary

Recommended age: 9+

Cost: Free

Technology needed: Smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

3. Mario Kart Tour

The long running Mario Kart franchise is now available on mobile devices. Mario and all his long-time friends go global as they race around courses inspired by real-world cities in addition to classic Mario Kart courses. Initially released in late 2019 as a single-player game with online elements, where players could aim to get the highest scores on the leader board and compare with friends, the game has recently introduced an online multiplayer component. Players can race against up to seven other players in real-time, including those who are registered as in-game friends.

Mario Kart Tour comes in a mobile version for smartphones and is available to download as an app. It is free to start with and has optional in-app purchases. A Nintendo Account is required; there is an option to create a Child Account for children aged 15 and under. Safety features and [restrictions on in-app purchases](#) on devices are also recommended given the game's emphasis on in-game transactions. It is rated for children aged 4 and over, though is probably better suited for children aged 7 or over.

The more elaborate entry of the Mario Kart franchise, [Mario Kart 8 Deluxe](#), allows for online multiplayer and requires a Nintendo Switch gaming console.

Summary

Recommended age: 7+

Cost: Free; in-app purchases available

Technology needed: Smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

4. UNO!

UNO is one of the world's most iconic and popular card games. It's competitive yet family-friendly, and easy to understand. The [UNO!](#) App allows children to play this classic card game virtually and for free on mobile devices. Children can easily connect with friends and family anytime and anywhere. Players can team up with friends and family members in a '2v2' mode to play with more strategy and team work. Children can also send voice messages to other players during a match, yell UNO into the device when they are about to win or cheer on friends and family as a spectator.

A mobile device, such as a smartphone or tablet, as well as an internet connection is needed to play UNO! It is [rated](#) for children aged 4 and over, though is probably better suited for children aged 7 years or older.

Summary

Recommended age: 7+

Cost: Free; in-app purchases available

Technology needed: Smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

5. Boggle with Friends

[Boggle With Friends](#) is the mobile version of this classic game. After shaking lettered dice into a grid, players earn points for all the word combinations they can spot in the letters. The app keeps score and the player who earns the highest points wins. To play with friends and family members, players can click on the Friends tab at the top right corner and select friends from contacts in the mobile device who have downloaded the app. Players can also text invite links to others to join.

The Boggle app is free to download and is [rated](#) for children aged 4 years and older.

Summary

Recommended age: 7+

Cost: Free; in-app purchases available

Technology needed: Smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

6. Board Game Arena

[Board Game Arena](#) is a website that hosts an impressive selection of 175 board games. Board games include traditional classics such as chess and checkers, as well as modern popular games such as Sushi Go, Race for the Galaxy and Bubblee Pop. Board Game Arena allows players to play board games with their friends and family members online. Players can add friends by searching for their screen name.

The games can be played either in real-time or turn-based. Real-time games are where all the players are online at the same time and take their turns just like they would in real life. Turn-based games are where players can be offline and each player takes their turn and waits for the other players to take their turn.

Board Games arena is easily accessible from internet browsers on PC and mobile devices. It is free to use but a paid subscription is available which may [enhance](#) access to the website during peak times. Age ratings for each board game vary. Parents and carers should assist children to select board games that are appropriate for their age and skill level.

Summary

Recommended age: Varies by board game

Cost: Free; paid subscription available

Technology needed: Internet browser (on PC, smartphone or tablet) and internet connection

7. Jackbox Games

[Jackbox Games](#) make party games that are available on a wide variety of digital platforms. While they are known for creating irreverent games that appeal to adults, they have released [dozens of games](#) that are fun and appropriate for the whole family to play together. All Jackbox Games are rated 'T' for 'Teen' but a 'family friendly' setting can be activated within the game's setting menu to play with kids aged 9 years and older. Here are a few Jackbox games to play with older children and teens:

- Drawful 2 – a game of hilariously bad drawings. Players are given a strange prompt that is hard to draw, like 'night farmer', and other players make up titles for it to fool everyone into thinking it was the original prompt. Points are given for guessing the correct prompt or fooling people with made up titles.

- Dictionarium – a silly game of making up new definitions for gibberish words and fake phrases like 'flonx' or 'fish shrugging.' There are no wrong answers, but the answer that gets the most votes goes into the Dictionarium, and then everyone has to use the word in a sentence. Dictionarium is easy to learn and has quick rounds that last about ten minutes.

- Guesspionage – a trivia game based on approximation. Guesspionage asks players to guess how real people responded to basic poll questions like, 'what percentage of people put ketchup on their hotdog?' When a player doesn't know the answer, they can just make up their own answer so no one is left out. It is easy to play across knowledge bases of different age groups.

Jackbox Games are typically played locally while all players are in the same room, and the main game screen is displayed on a TV using a platform like Apple TV or a laptop. Players use their phones (or any device with an internet browser) to write and draw their answers.

To play Jackbox games with friends and family in [remote locations](#), we recommend using a videoconferencing service such as Skype or Zoom. The host can start the game on their computer and uses the screen-sharing option in the video call so other players can see the main game screen. Players can play along on their own mobile devices by going to [Jackbox.tv](#) on an internet browser and entering the designated room code.

Jackbox Games can be purchased from their [website](#) in 'party packs' or as standalone titles or individual games. Prices range from about AU$10-35.

FAMILY GAME NIGHT

SNACKS
Pizza, veggies, popcorn

DRINKS
Something for everyone

TIMING
Friday night after school and work

AMBIANCE
Living room! Everyone has a spot on the couch

Summary

Recommended age: 9+

Cost: AU$10-35

Technology needed: Laptop or desktop computer, smartphone, video conferencing platform, internet connection

8. Minecraft

Minecraft is a multiplatform sandbox adventure game. Players explore the world and use the building blocks of the game to customise their world to create nearly anything they can imagine. The game is relatively easy to pick up and play but is still complicated enough to challenge children when it comes to building more complex items and structures, encouraging children to get creative and channel their inner construction engineer. Up to eight friends can join an online game and collaborate to build whatever they can dream up in creative mode, or friends can join up to see how long they can last in survival mode.

Summary

Recommended age: 9+

Cost: AU$10.99-$69.95

Technology needed: PC, smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android), or gaming console (Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch) — cross-platform play available; internet connection

Minecraft provides a good opportunity for children to engage in social play, co-play and connection. Australian research conducted into how children play Minecraft showed that 80% of children who play Minecraft *sometimes* play with someone else and almost half *often* play with someone else – including siblings, friends, parents or other relatives.

Minecraft is available for purchase in three versions—PC, mobile or console—and costs vary according to version. It is rated for children aged 9 years and over for Infrequent/Mild Cartoon or Fantasy Violence and parental guidance and supervision is recommended for children aged 9 - 15 due to online communication with others. Parents and carers should discuss online safety with children prior to introducing them to Minecraft and supervise when children are playing in multiplayer mode. Risks in multiplayer mode include bullying and contact with strangers as well as stumbling upon malware and viruses.

9. Pokémon Go

Pokémon Go is a mobile 'augmented reality' game that allows players to discover and collect up to 500 hidden virtual creatures, *Pokémon*, as they explore the world around them. The game uses the GPS capabilities of mobile devices and allows players to locate, capture, battle and train Pokémon as if they exist in the player's real-world location. With the recent COVID-19 outbreak, the game's developer have updated the game so that it is easier to find Pokémon closer to home.

In Pokémon Go, children can create a friends list, interact with their friends and track their activity. They can even engage in some in-game trading and gift giving, although it should be noted that trading can only occur when players are in close proximity to each other (within 100 metres) in real life. The game is free to download to smartphones with in-app purchases available. It is rated for children aged 9 years and over with 'Infrequent/Mild Cartoon or Fantasy Violence'. However, the game may be more suitable for children over 13 due to privacy concerns and adult references.

Summary

Recommended age: 13+

Cost: Free; in-app purchases available

Technology needed: Smartphone or tablet (iOS/Android; cross-platform play available), internet connection

10. Overcooked 2

Overcooked 2 is a chaotic cooperative cooking game where players must serve a variety of recipes including sushi, pasta, cakes, burgers and burritos to hungry customers in a series of unconventional kitchens – think hot air balloons, a magical Wizard's school or even another planet. Players prep orders for customers while overcoming obstacles such as fires, collapsing floors or overbearing waiters. Overcooked 2 can be played with up to three friends either as a team or against each other. The game provides opportunities for children to engage in leadership and cooperation.

Overcooked 2 is available on Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows, and Xbox One platforms; however, cross-platform is not available. The game must be purchased in order to play. The game is G-rated and suitable for all ages however younger children may need some assistance from time to time and it has been recommended for children aged 8 years and over.

Summary

Recommended age: 8+

Cost: approximately AU$59.95

Technology needed: Gaming console (Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows, or Xbox One; cross-platform play not available), internet connection

Information about online gaming

- **What is meant by 'cross-platform' play or cross-play?** This describes whether players can play the same game together if they are using different video game hardware (eg consoles, operating system). Most mobile games allow for cross-platform play, where it doesn't matter whether players are using an Apple (iOS) or Android phone. On the other hand, some games are not cross-platform, meaning that players each need to have the game on the same console type. For example, a person who has Overcooked 2 on their Nintendo Switch would not be able to play online with another person who has Overcooked 2 on their computer.

- **Is there anything else needed to play online on video game consoles?** For certain video game consoles (ie PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch), a paid subscription is needed to access online multiplayer modes in games. Prices range from $30 to $90 per year, depending on the specific console.

- **What is 'Steam'?** If your children commonly play games on PC, you might be familiar with Steam, an online platform that distributes and stores digital games (a bit like the Apple App store or Google Play store). Games that are available on the Steam store can be purchased and are added to the user's 'Library'. Some of the PC games mentioned in this sheet are available on Steam. The Steam platform also has video streaming and community features like friends lists, in-game voice and chat functionality.

- **And what is 'Discord'?** Commonly used in the online gaming community, Discord is a free app for mobile and PC that lets people chat via text, voice, or video in real time. It requires users to be at least 13 years old to join. With the right privacy settings and monitoring, it's easy for children and family members to use Discord safely by only accepting friend requests and creating/participating in private servers with people they already know.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY