



Parents Guide to Game Reviews

Use this game sheet to answer the question: “Should my child play this game?”. It is quick and allows you to have a conversation, rather than a fight, about which games to play.

You can [use this walkthrough video](#) if you’d like a more detailed explanation.

1: Select a game you want to grade. Write the title here: _____.

2: Review the Six Categories: Characters, Themes, Violence, Language, Play Time, Game Experience (extended descriptions of each available below).

3: Follow the five simple steps (a more detailed walk through is available below):

Step 1: Go to the Entertainment Software Review Board (esrb.org).

Step 2: Visit Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia.org)

Step 3: Go to How Long To Beat (howlongtobeat.com).

Step 4: Go to Google (google.com).

Step 5: Go to Bing without safe search on (bing.com).

(Note: This can get graphic/explicit. I encourage parents to do this step with another person, NOT their child, in the room.)

4: Write your grade for each category. Consider games innocent until proven guilty. Each category starts with a full 3/3. Subtract one point from the score each time the game does not line up with your standards for your family.

| Grade Categories | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Grade & Comments |
|------------------------|---------------|---|-------------|---|------------------|
| Characters | Detrimental | | Positive | | |
| | | | | | |
| Themes | Inappropriate | | Beneficial | | |
| | | | | | |
| Violence | Grotesque | | Cartoon | | |
| | | | | | |
| Language | Hateful | | Kind | | |
| | | | | | |
| Play Time | Engrossing | | Minimal | | |
| | | | | | |
| Game Experience | Unhealthy | | Encouraging | | |
| | | | | | |

5. Final Score: _____ / 18



Score Breakdown:

17-18: Excellent match for your family.

15-16: Vary in minor areas. Often will still be a good fit for your family.

13-14: Reasonably age appropriate, but off in several important areas.

11-12: Questionable. There are themes and values that vary widely from your family expectations.

9-10: Mature audiences only. Not a good fit for young players.

5-8: Inappropriate for most audiences, even adults.

0-4: Skip it. Some fun just isn't worth the price of admission.

Detailed Walkthrough of the Five Steps

Step 1: Go to the Entertainment Software Review Board (esrb.org)

- Enter your game title in the "Search ESRB Rating" box located at the top of the page.
- Click the version of the game you wish to review (make sure the title matches).
- Read the game summary and grade: Language, Violence, Characters, and Themes.

Step 2: Visit Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia.org)

- Enter the game title into the "What are you looking for?" box at the top right of the page.
- Click the game you want to review.
- Read their game review and grade: Language, Violence, Characters, and Themes.

Step 3: Go to How Long To Beat (howlongtobeat.com)

- Enter the game title into the "Search your favorite game" box at the top left.
- Look at the "Completionist" play time (shows how much content in full game).
- Grade Play Time. We suggest you subtract a 1 point for every 20 hours of play time.

Step 4: Go to Google (google.com).

- Search the game title followed by the word "gameplay". Ex: Apex Legends gameplay
- Click on one of the top videos.
- Watch 1 minute of gameplay and answer 3 questions related to the pace and style of gameplay.
 - 1 Is fast-paced or frenetic game play? (Do your eyes hurt? Is your heart pumping?)
 - 2 Does the game glorify / reward behaviors you don't support?
 - 3 Is it a highly competitive play style?

A yes in one or more should impact grades in Game Experience, Violence, Language, Characters and Theme.

Step 5: Search the game on Bing.

NOTE: I encourage parents to do this step with someone else, NOT their child, in the room. This can get graphic/explicit.

- Go to Bing (NOT Google). Click on the three lined “options” button at the top right.
- Click on “SafeSearch” 2/3 of the way down the menu. Select “Off” and save to update settings.
- Type the game name into the search bar and press enter.
- Click the “images” heading (third option over). Scroll down.

While not always part of the game this content is part of the user experience. This search will show you what your child might come into while innocently trying to find out more about their favorite game. Personal sites, hobby sites like Pinterest, Tumblr, and other fan content sites are part of the experience.

Accidental pornography exposure is an important reality parents need to navigate. Search the game title.

This gives insights into Game Experience as well as Characters, Violence, and Theme.

Detailed Review of the Six Categories

Characters: Would I have this character over for dinner?

- Why do they take the actions they take?
- What lessons will a player gain from the problem solving and motives of the characters?
- Would you let your child watch a movie with this character in it?

Your child is going to be engaged in hours of activity with this individual. Make sure they reflect your family’s beliefs and meet the standards you have for any consistent influence in your child’s life.

Themes: Is this a lesson my child should be learning now?

Video games consistently include engaging storylines which often involve plot points and lessons around a range of topics. Are the topics and lessons appropriate for players of all ages or focused on a more adult and educated audience?

Topics in many modern games include:

- life, death, and survival
- revolution, war, and freedom
- politics, corruption, and injustice
- reality and the purpose of existence
- depression, suicide, mental health
- morality, good and evil
- drugs and crime
- sex, sexuality, love, and family
- god, faith, and spirituality
- magic, power, and sacrifice (personal and otherwise)

Violence: Is violence part of the story, or is it the point of the game?

Even the safest games, such as a Super Mario Brothers, involve some kind of physical struggle and fighting.

Look at the type of combat. Cartoonish combat involving jumping on an opponent will probably score better than gory scenes that involve grotesque and extravagant violence.

Look for why the combat is there: Is it part of the plot, or is the violence itself glorified? If you get points for destroying opponents in visceral and grotesque ways the violence should score more toward a zero.

- Is violence cartoon or vividly real?
- Is the violence fast-paced and frenetic or slower paced?
- Do the reasons for violence match your families expectations around the right time for violence?
- Is there a focus on macabre, extreme, and/or graphic violence?
- Is death and violence a common theme throughout the game?
- Can you solve problems in the game through means other than violence?
- Does the game include a variety of ways to do violence?
- Can you dismember opponents?
- Does the game include executions, glory kills, pre-animated finishing moves or other aspects that give special attention to the act of killing an opponent?
- Can you activate specials or receive other rewards for violence / killing?

Language: Would you say this in front of grandma?

Controlling our tongue is a big deal. Jesus says we'll give an account for everything we say ([Matthew 12:36](#)), and writers from Solomon to James remind us that wise people guard their words. ([Proverbs 21:23](#), [James 1:19](#), [3:2](#)).

Does the in-game dialogue and conversations support how you expect your child to speak to others?

Does it match how you expect them to talk with their friends, competitors, siblings and strangers?

Remember that online games include language from fellow players. The more competitive and mature the game, the more likely harsh language will be present.

Play Time: Can this game be beaten in two weeks?

How much time our children spend with entertainment tech matters. The average teen consumes 9 hours of entertainment tech a day (Common Sense, 2015). A 2017 study found that HALF of young adults who consume 5 or more hours a day experience at least one suicide related outcome (sad or hopeless, considering suicide, planning suicide, attempting suicide). (Twenge et al, 2017, pg. 12)

Based on current research, a good place to start is no more than two hours of Droll Tech a day and no more 10 hours in a week.

This means that a game should require fewer than 20 hours to beat in order to get full points in a game review. Games that are faster to beat will demand less time to be satisfying. They also allow a healthier amount to focus - shorter games simply demand less mental bandwidth and players can more easily walk away and enjoy other parts of life.

You will visit www.howlongtobeat.com:

For every 20 hours of play time under the "Completionist" section the game loses one point. So a game that requires 25 hours to beat earns two points, whereas a game that requires 88 hours to beat earns zero.

If a game requires competitive online (meaning there isn't a single player mode in the game) it should score a Time grade no higher than one. Online-only games are designed to drive players from round to round and hold a high risk for unhealthy play. They may have quick play sessions but are not meant to be played just once.

Game Experience:

As parents we need to be present in the game experience. The game may have safe content (plot, characters, violence) but encourage unhealthy gaming habits or encourage an unhealthy player community. These games should be avoided by young gamers. To grade Play Experience we look at two areas:

Are there micro-transactions: These are purchases made with real money in game. They can be for “skins” (clothes for a character), equipment, new levels, or characters. Some companies limit player options or play time to encourage purchases through these micro-transactions.

What is the game play like?

Is game play highly competitive?

Highly competitive play means emotions run high and your child runs the risk of overhearing, or being called, some things from other gamers who get a little too into their game play.

Is game play fast-paced?

Faster paced and more competitive game play is more likely to have an aggressive and adult Game Experience.

Competitive and fast-paced games will increase a gamer’s desire to play more so they can improve. These game play environments are often more “toxic” and likely to be filled with unkind comments, language, and actions.

How is the game culture? Some games have adult-themed sub-cultures that go with them. A game-culture check helps ensure your child won’t be accidentally exposed to content or experiences that are not part of the game-prepared content.

Go to Bing (it has fewer default safety measures than Google), pull off Safe Search, and enter the game name.

- Click on “images”. Scroll down.

An images search helps show what your child might come into while innocently trying to find out more about their favorite game. If your child decides they love this game and want to find more info on Pinterest, Tumblr, or other fan content sites this is what they are likely to find.

While not always part of the game this content is part of the user experience.

Accidental pornography exposure, as well as being involved in gaming communities that are not age appropriate, are real obstacles we as parents need to navigate.

