

Neurodivergent Young People's Experiences of Online Gaming

internet
matters.org

ROBLOX

Research Summary



Aims and Methodology

Supported by Roblox, Internet Matters (a UK not-for-profit specialising in online safety) has conducted research into neurodivergent young people's experiences, behaviours and attitudes towards online gaming.

The research took place in late 2023 and engaged neurodivergent young people aged 11-17 in the UK and US, along with parents. As part of the research we hosted:

- An online survey of neurodivergent young people and parents across the UK and US from which we have 480 responses.
- Online focus groups with neurodivergent young people and parents in the UK and US involving 18 parents and 20 young people aged 11-17.

The purpose of the research was to identify how neurodivergent young people can be better supported online, so that they can enjoy the benefits of online gaming whilst reducing the risks.

Key Findings

Neurodivergent young people spend significant amounts of time playing online games.

- **Over 9 in 10 young people** are playing video games by themselves offline and a similar proportion are playing video games with other people online.
- **More than 4 in 5** are making their own content online, e.g. livestreaming themselves as they game.
- **3 in 10 young people** told us they are gaming online with other people every day or most days, for an average of roughly 3 hours on a weekday and 3.5 hours on a weekend.
- **Roblox is popular:** 93% of young people play Roblox with *Adopt Me!*, *Tower of Hell* and *Brookhaven* being most popular.

Many feel that online gaming offers them many benefits.

- Young people told us that **gaming helps them to stay entertained** (45%), relax (42%) and feel part of a community (31%).
- **58% said gaming makes them happy** and half said that gaming helps them make friends online.
- **However, some young people disagree that online gaming made them happy,** with young people in the UK particularly likely to say this (21%). Reasons included finding it difficult to control the amount of time spent gaming, and feelings of frustration and anger if things weren't going well for them in the game.

Young people in the focus groups highlighted many positive things about the benefits of online gaming, including its impact on their communication skills (for example, being able to talk and interact with others online), opportunities to be creative and adventurous, and being able to make friends with similar interests in a way that was sometimes easier than in real life.

Young people involved in the focus groups said that they felt more accepted when they were gaming online. They talked about feeling accepted for who they were, being comfortable in the online gaming communities and not feeling labelled.



Parents of neurodivergent young people also saw the benefits of gaming online for their children.

The survey told us that online gaming had:

- Supported their child to learn other skills they could use in everyday life including **confidence and problem solving** (63%).
- Helped their child to **communicate better** (59%).

However, parents also had concerns about their child's online gaming.

Over half felt their child spent too much time on online gaming. Similarly, more than half felt that their behaviour got worse when they were gaming, and that gaming could cause arguments. Parents discussed their child becoming aggressive, short-tempered and irritable, particularly when they spent a lot of time gaming online.

Parents in the focus groups highlighted worries about their child becoming obsessive about games they were playing and the friendships they had made online. They were also worried about the focus on spending in games and the risk of their child being scammed.

"I feel accepted. I feel very comfortable talking to people online. I have zero issues with some people, but overall, I honestly just feel very comfortable. I can be myself and there's no one who could really tell you what to do on playing games".

– US Young person, aged 15-17



"If he spends too much time online, he just gets more short tempered, gets more frustrated with his siblings, easier and quicker. And so one of the first things we do is when he starts getting real irritable is to decrease the gaming or the online activity. Give me your phone, give me your laptop. We need to take a break".

– US Parent

Most neurodivergent young people are confident they can keep themselves safe online – although more than a third are not confident.

- **63% of young people** told us that they are totally confident or very confident in keeping themselves safe online.
- **60% of parents** agreed that they felt confident that their child knows how to stay safe when gaming online.

Most parents of neurodivergent young people are taking steps to keep their children safe when they are gaming online.

Over 3 in 5 parents talk to their child regularly about being safe when gaming online (64%) and have rules in place about gaming (62%). Many parents also check their child's devices (59%).

However, many parents do not use online safety tools or controls.

Between 39%-48% of parents were not aware of, or did not plan to use, tools like screentime management apps, gaming parental controls or safety software.

Neurodivergent young people find certain parts of online gaming challenging.

Around 1 in 4 young people find the sensory aspect of gaming challenging. Furthermore, over 1 in 5 young people find the accessibility of games (23%) and communicating with others a challenge (22%).

Most young people think that their parents are the best people to talk to them about being safe online. However, they also think that gaming platforms could play an important role in this.

When asked about the best people to talk to:

- **67%** of young people mentioned parents.
- **47%** of young people mentioned gaming platforms.
- **41%** of young people mentioned other young people like them.

Most young people would like to find out about online safety whilst gaming on the gaming platform itself (59%), or through dedicated sections on the gaming platform website (51%).

Young people said they would most value help in the following areas:

- Knowing how to talk to their parents/ caregivers about issues that occur (48%).
- Learning how to interact with others online (44%).
- Learning how to play games themselves in a safe manner (45%). themselves in a safe manner (45%).



Next steps

Internet Matters has published a full research report from this project, exploring the themes contained within this summary in greater detail.

Internet Matters is also using the key findings from this research to enhance and extend our educational resources for neurodivergent young people and their parents to better support them in keeping safe whilst gaming online.