

Connecting with Your Teenager through Video Games



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Introduction

My name is Eric Rogers and I love video games.

I have been a gamer for nearly 30 years, starting with an Atari 2700 at my grandmother's house. I spent many an afternoon tucked away in her back room playing Defender and Ms. Pac-Man. Video games have been an integral part of my life ever since. I love the interactivity they offer. While TV and movies can challenge your perceptions and ideas, video games can do that and so much more. They can challenge your reflexes, your memory, your hand-eye coordination, and your social skills.

I am also a parent. I have a 4 year old, a 17 month old, and my wife is expecting our 3rd child. As a parent, I have begun to understand the importance of connecting with my kids through the things they love. When I dance with my daughter or throw the ball with my son, they know Daddy is connected and in tune with them.

In the same way, video games can offer an amazing opportunity to connect with your teenager that other forms of media simply can't match. The interactive nature of video games creates experiences that bind you together. You will find yourself saying things like "Did you see when I..." or "That was hilarious when you...". These shared experiences become part of your family history.

**99% of boys and
94% of girls play
video games.**

This guide is designed to equip you as a parent to connect with your teenager through video games. Through it, you will be provided with the knowledge to do three things.

1. Be involved in your teenager's gaming. This includes talking to, playing with, and watching with him/her.
2. Purchase games for your teenager with confidence.
3. Evaluate the games your teenager is playing for both content and quality.

As a quick side note, I don't want you to think this guide isn't for you if your teenager is a girl. The paper [Teens, Video Games and Civics](#), [The Pew Internet and America Life Project](#) found, "Fully 99% of boys and 94% of girls play video games." The stereotype of a gamer may be male, but girls are playing too.

Before I get too far into the guide, however, I want to take a moment to address the stereotype of a "gamer" a bit more in depth.

In Defense of Video Games

If you pay attention to the news, you may be asking yourself if you should even allow your teenager to play video games. Video games have been accused of causing everything from [childhood obesity](#) to [mass murder](#). The media paints a picture of gamers as overaggressive boys who don't know the difference between games and reality. If that's true, it makes sense that you would want to keep your teenager as far away from them as possible.

As technology has advanced, it is absolutely true that video games have become more graphic. However, there are two reasons to be skeptical of hype in the media about violent video games.

65% of games in
2011 were rated
E or E10+
9% were rated M

1. The link between violent video games and aggressive behavior is tenuous at best. While there have been conflicting studies on whether playing violent video games causes more aggressive behavior, one thing is certain. [Violent crime has decreased](#) in the same time period that games have become more graphic and more prevalent. While not necessarily proof that violent video games don't have any effect, it seems to point to them having less of an effect than some in the news media or government would have you believe.
2. Most video games are not violent. In 2011, the [Entertainment Software Rating Board](#) (ESRB) [gave 9% of the games they rated an M rating](#). 65% were given an E or E10+. This means that 65% of the games were given

ratings equivalent to a G or PG in movies, while only 9% received a rating equivalent to an R. The remaining 26% received a T, or PG-13, rating. As a parent, if you decide not to let your teenager play violent video games, there is still a plethora of games from which to choose.

In my opinion, playing games won't make your teenager violent. It also won't automatically make them a lazy slob, another common stereotype.

We all want our kids to grow up to be strong, confident, contributing members of society. However, the stigma of gamers is that they are overweight, anti-social introverts living in their parent's basement, eating Cheetos and staring at the TV all day.

This is not an accurate stereotype. I am a gamer and, like most gamers, I am a regular person. I was involved in extracurricular activities in high school, specifically band and soccer. I went to college, got a degree, and got a good job when I graduated. I married an amazing woman and have 2, about to be 3, amazing kids.

Video games are my hobby. Some people golf. Others like to fish or hunt. Still others enjoy working on cars. I play games.

The stories you hear in the news are extreme cases. Some people become obsessed, like the man in Korea who [died after playing StarCraft for 50 hours](#). However, it is just as easy to become obsessed with golf or fishing or cars.

The key is learning balance. Part of our job as parents is to teach our kids that balance. We need to set realistic limits and encourage our kids to explore and enjoy life.

If you are like me, though, you want to be more than just an enforcer of rules. You want to connect with your teenager. You want to be involved in what they are doing. The rest of this guide is designed to help you do just that.

Being Involved

The first, and most important, way to get involved is to talk to your teenager.

It is intimidating when I don't know much about the things in which my kids are participating. My daughter started taking gymnastics recently. The only experience I have with it is watching the Olympics every 4 years. I don't know if she's learning what she's supposed to or doing well for her age. My lack of knowledge makes me feel inadequate.

It can be the same with video games. How do you get involved in your teenager's gaming if you've rarely, if ever, played yourself? I am going to lay out some tips in this section to help ease you in.

Talk

The first, and most important, way to get involved is to talk to your teenager. I know I love to talk about the games I am playing, especially if the person I'm talking to is genuinely interested.

Here is a list of questions you can ask to get the ball rolling.

- What are you playing?
- What do you enjoy most about that game?
- Is there anything about that game you don't like?

- Are you playing with any of your friends? If so, who?
- Are there any games coming out soon you are excited about? (This one will get them talking and also give you gift ideas.)

As with most hobbies, gamers have their own language. It can be hard to keep up if you don't understand what your teenager is saying. Don't be afraid to ask. I am going to define some terms throughout this guide. However, I will not be able to address everything. Asking him to explain something you don't understand will show you are genuinely interested.

Play

Once you have opened up the dialog with your teenager, the next best thing you can do is play with him. I admit this can be extremely intimidating. I've been a gamer most of my life and still get intimidated getting into a game that other people have been playing for a long time. I don't want to look stupid.

One way to relieve that intimidation is to watch your teenager play. This will give you a feel for the game he is playing while also spending time with him. You can start to learn some of the terms he's using without the pressure of actually playing.

There are a couple options when you feel you are ready to start playing. One is to jump right into the game he's playing and learn on the fly. This can be tough but it will show him you are serious.

The second option is to start with a game that is not quite as intense. I have listed 4 good “starter” games here. I picked each game because it will teach you skills (such as how to control your character) that can be transferred to other games. I also tried to pick games you could play with your teenager.

•[Portal 2](#) ([E10+](#), [95 Metascore](#)) – A First-Person Shooter (FPS) puzzle game. Instead of shooting enemies, you shoot portals onto walls to solve puzzles. It has a co-op mode that allows two people to solve the puzzles together.

This is a great starter game for a couple of reasons.

1. The First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre is one of the most popular out there. [Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 sold more than 6.5 million copies](#) in the first 24 hours after it was released in 2011.

Portal 2 is not as fast paced as other FPSs. This will allow you to learn how the controls in an FPS work at your own pace. You can then transfer those skills into games like Call of Duty.

2. The co-op feature requires interaction between the two players to get through the puzzles. Some of the puzzles can be quite challenging. It can be exhilarating when you finally find the solution together. This is a good way to begin building bonds with your teenager.

Portal 2 is available on the PC/Mac, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.

•[New Super Mario Bros.](#) ([E](#), [87 Metascore](#)) – A sidescrolling platformer. This game allows up to 4 players to play together.

This is a good starter game because the controls are simple. You use the D-pad (the cross on the controller that allows you to move up, down, left, and right) and 2 buttons. Once you get the hang of it, you will be able to jump into most platformers with no problem.

New Super Mario Bros. is available on the Wii.

•[Burnout Paradise](#) (E10+, [88 Metascore](#)) – An open world racing game. This is a great racing game to start with for a couple reasons.

- "Open world" means there is a large area you can drive around. There are races and challenges you can do, but they are not required. This will help you get the feel of a driving game without having to worry about losing a race.
- Burnout is an arcade racer, meaning it's much more forgiving when you crash into things. In fact, some of the challenges **require** you to crash into things.

Burnout Paradise is available on the PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.

•[World of Warcraft \(WoW\)](#) (T, [93 Metascore](#)) – A Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). WoW is the biggest MMO out there with [over 10 million subscribers](#). It is also [free-to-play for the first 20 levels](#).

WoW is the obvious place to start with MMOs because it is so big. It also does a pretty good job easing you into the MMO world. Your teenager can create a character to play with you while still maintaining whatever character he may have already started.

World of Warcraft is available for the PC or Mac

Watch

A new form of consuming video games has emerged over the last few years. As internet speeds have increased, so has the ability to watch videos of other people playing games, either a recording or in real-time.

Now, this might seem a little strange. Why would you want to watch someone play a video game instead of playing it yourself? You would for the same reasons you want to watch sports.

1. When we watch the professionals, we are watching the best. I played soccer in high school. I loved playing then and still love playing now. However, I was never good enough play with the professionals. [Watching them do what they do](#) gives me a glimpse of their greatness.
2. When we watch, we learn. Do you know how offside works in hockey? Or icing? Or a faceoff? I do, but only because I've watched hockey on TV. I've never played it. Watching hockey with good commentary helped me understand what was going on when I had no other experience.
3. When we watch, we share in the experience. The video I linked to above is from a World Cup qualifying match between England and Greece on October 6, 2001. I was living in Wales at the time and vividly remember watching that game. It was the most intense sporting event I have ever witnessed. Being there and seeing it live gave me a connection to my home away from home like nothing else could.

When we watch,
we share in the
experience.

Here are some links to sites that will help you get started doing the 3 things I mentioned above.

1. Watching the pros – [Major League Gaming \(MLG\)](#) – MLG holds worldwide tournaments for games like [StarCraft 2](#) and [League of Legends](#). Their production level is high and their commentators know their stuff.
2. Learning – [day9.tv](#) – Sean “Day[9]” Plott breaks down replays of StarCraft 2 matches to help players of all levels improve.
3. Sharing – [twitch.tv](#) – Twitch.tv allows gamers to stream videos of themselves playing games. [PC Gamer](#) magazine streams a lot of different games on [their stream](#).

[YouTube](#) – A recent develop on YouTube is the rise of “Let’s Play” videos. These are videos of people playing and talking about a game. Searching for “Let’s Play” and the name of the game you are interested in will probably bring up a bunch of videos.

Now that you have an idea of how to get involved with your teenager, let’s look at how you can evaluate the games he is playing.

Evaluating Video Games

In this section, I am going to give you the information you need to evaluate the games your teenager plays. I am doing this not just so you can be the gatekeeper of the content she is exposed to, although that is very important. My goal is to give you the confidence you need to pick out a game for her. I will do this by helping you answer 3 questions.

1. What game would my teenager be interested in?
2. What content is in this game?
3. Is this game any good?

In 2011, the ESRB rated 1,332 games.

What game would my teenager be interested in?

In 2011, the ESRB rated 1,332 games. That is a lot of games to sort through when looking for something for your teenager. And since new releases can cost up to \$60, you want to make sure you are getting her something she will enjoy. How can you narrow the choices down?

There are a few things you can do to help answer this question.

1. Ask her. This is the most direct way to know if she's interested in a particular game. She will probably have heard about the game and have an opinion on it. Of course, this route can also ruin any surprise.
2. Keep a list of the games she is interested in as she tells you about them. One of the questions I mentioned previously was about the games she is looking

forward to. Making a note of each one she mentions will help you narrow down your choices to games you know she's interested in.

3. Ask her about the games she owns and plays. This can give you an idea of the types of games she enjoys, which can narrow the search. You specifically want to know the genres and types of games in which she is most interested. (I recommend looking over [this list of genres](#) on Wikipedia to understand the vocabulary.) This option requires more effort on your part, but can lead to a greater payoff. I know I enjoy the reaction I get when I am able to pick out the perfect gift without having to ask the person directly.

Once you have an idea of the genre that your teenager is most likely to enjoy, you need to determine the platform, or hardware, on which your teenager will play the game. You can find a list of the current platforms [here](#). Keep in mind that the genre you picked may have platform exclusives that you need to be aware of. There are games that are released only on one platform. For example, your teenager will not be able to play Halo 3 if they only own a PlayStation 3. It is exclusive to the Xbox 360.

Now that you know what genre and platform you are targeting, you can narrow down your search to specific games. I recommend the site [Giant Bomb](#) to get started. When looking up a specific game on Giant Bomb, you will find the "Related Games" section on the right-hand side. Here, you can find games that are similar to the one your teenager enjoys.

Once you have decided on a game, it's time to ask the next question.

What Content Is In This Game?

Evaluating the content of a video game can be a bit more difficult than other forms of media. Games can take hours to complete, if they are even possible to complete. Some games, like WoW and Madden, have no end. In addition, it is not feasible to play through most games to make sure the content is something you are alright with, as you would with watching a movie or reading the lyrics to a song. So what can you do?

Earlier, I mentioned the [Entertainment Software Rating Board \(ESRB\)](#). The ESRB serves the same role with video games that the Rating Board does with movies. It gives each game a rating and includes content descriptors to give a quick snapshot of the content in a game. This is then displayed prominently on the game's packaging or website.

This is where you want to start when evaluating a particular game. There are 7 possible ratings a game can receive.



EARLY CHILDHOOD

Content may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.



EVERYONE

Content may be suitable for ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.



EVERYONE 10+

Content may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.



TEEN

Content may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language.



MATURE

Content may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.



ADULTS ONLY

Content should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.



RATING PENDING

Titles designated as **RP (Rating Pending)** have not yet been assigned a final ESRB rating. This icon appears only in advertising, marketing and promotional materials related to a game that is expected to carry an ESRB rating. The RP is replaced by a game's rating once it has been assigned.

([ESRB Rating & Content Descriptor Guide](#))

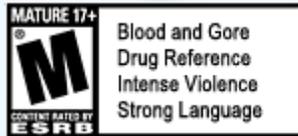
You will only see the RP rating on games that have not been released yet. The others can be roughly translated into movie ratings.

- EC & E = G
- E10+ = PG
- T = PG-13
- M = R
- AO = NC-17

As you know, these ratings are a good starting point but you really need more information to make an informed decision about a game. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Bridesmaids* are both rated R but for very different reasons. The ESRB includes descriptors with the rating to give you a better understanding of the game's content. You can find [the full list of descriptors](#) on the ESRB's website.

Let's look at a few examples to see how different games are rated.

First, let's look at [Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3](#) (MW3). It is a military first-person shooter (FPS) released in 2011. It is one of the best selling games of all time, [selling 6.5 million copies in the first 24 hours](#). This is the rating it was given by the ESRB:

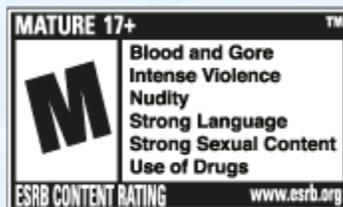


This rating is what you would expect from a military FPS. The protagonist is a soldier in the military, sometimes even in the special forces. The enemies are normally human as well. The story usually involves the player trying to stop a plot of some kind, which leads to a lot of killing.

Looking at this rating, we can assume MW3 follows these ideas. The “Blood and Gore” and “Intense Violence” descriptors let us know there will probably be a lot of shooting. The “Strong Language” descriptor is not surprising. Movies and video games that feature soldiers normally have a lot of swearing.

Now, let's look at [The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings](#). This is a role-playing game that was also released in 2011. While not nearly as popular as MW3, [it still sold 1.7 million copies](#).

This is its rating:



As you can see, it received the same M rating that MW3 did but includes some different descriptors. They both have “Blood and Gore”, “Intense Violence”, and “Strong Language”. Then, The Witcher 2 rating includes “Use of Drugs” instead of “Drug Reference”, which tells me drugs are probably more pronounced in it. And finally, this rating includes “Nudity” and “Strong Sexual Content”, which are missing from the MW3 rating altogether.

While these descriptors give us a better understanding of why a game received a given rating, it can sometimes be beneficial to drill down even more. For example, why does The Witcher 2 have the “Nudity” descriptor? Maybe there are certain types of nudity you aren’t worried about but others you don’t want your teenager to see (i.e. you aren’t too worried about your teenage boy seeing a male backside but don’t want him seeing female nudity at all).

The final piece of information the ESRB provides is a detailed summary of the content in the game that prompted the descriptors. For example, the [summary for The Witcher 2](#) tells us, “During the course of the game, some female characters are depicted topless; there is also a fleeting image of pubic hair as a woman dives into the water.” So now we know why it received the “Nudity” descriptor. While the rating box will be displayed on the game, this summary is available on the [ESRB website](#).

One thing you may notice as you look at ratings is the phrase, “Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB”. This phrase is included on games that include an online component. One of the reasons Call of Duty sells so well is its online feature. Players are able to compete with and against each other over the internet. This extends the life of the game beyond what is enjoyable alone.

Playing a game online can change the experience because you are playing with other

Unlike other forms of media, video games can be broken.

people. Those people might be kind and courteous or they might be foul-mouthed jerks. However, giving every online game an M rating because a player could swear a lot is unfair to the developer. So this phrase is included to alert parents to this possibility.

Once you are satisfied that the content of the game you are evaluating is acceptable, there's one more question to ask.

Is This Game Any Good?

The final question you want to ask before purchasing a game is, "Is this game any good?" The importance of this question is fundamentally different with video games than with other forms of media.

The question of whether a particular movie is good is highly subjective. For example, [Transformers: Dark of the Moon](#) received a [35% out of 100 from critics](#) according to [Rotten Tomatoes](#). However, I loved it. I went in wanting to see cool vehicles that turn into robots and explosions. It delivered, so in my opinion, it is a good movie.

There is a sense of that subjectivity in video games as well. There are games that have received rave reviews that I haven't enjoyed for purely subjective reasons. However, there is one major difference between video games and any other form of media. Video games can be broken.

Have you ever been in a movie at the theater that quit working? While that can definitely be a frustrating experience, you wouldn't say the movie is bad because of it. The fact that it quit working is a problem with the theater, not the movie.

Video games, however, are much different. Each one, no matter how simple, is a complex

piece of software. It takes a team of people many months, if not years, to develop a game no matter how big. So it is very possible that a game could be released with major issues that render it unplayable. This is one of the main reasons to read reviews before purchasing a game.

For example, there was a game released in 2010 call [Elemental: War of Magic](#). It was developed by [Stardock Entertainment](#), who published the critically acclaimed [Sins of a Solar Empire](#). I like Stardock as a company so I was keeping an eye on Elemental. If it reviewed well, I was probably going to pick it up.

However, it had some major issues when it was released. [GameSpot](#) gave it a [4.0 out of 10](#).

“A decent strategic foundation is rendered all but meaningless by horrific bugs, missing features, a poor interface, and plenty of other defects.” [GameSpot Review](#)

Reviews like this made me ultimately decide to pass on this game. While the premise was interesting to me, I didn't want to spend my money on something that was broken.

So how do you find reviews of the game you are evaluating? If you type “video game reviews” into Google you will get millions of results. It can be daunting. Luckily there is a site that aggregates those reviews for you. [Metacritic.com](#)

Metacritic combines the scores from sites all over the internet to give a game [one Metascore between 0 and 100](#). It then shows you how many critic reviews are positive (75 to 100), mixed (50 to 74) and bad (49 and under). Finally, it includes links to the different reviews so you can read them in full.

Let's look at the [Elemental: War of Magic page](#). You will see it has a Metascore of 53 with

0 positive, 12 mixed, and 7 negative critic reviews. Based on that information, you would probably want to pass on this game.

My general rule of thumb is that a score of 80 is the cut-off point when researching a game I am interested in. A score of 80 or more tells me the game is probably pretty solid and will probably at least meet my expectations. Anything over 90 tells me it will probably exceed them.

There are, however, some exceptions. A score of less than 80 doesn't always mean I won't purchase a game. For example, [Serious Sam 3: BFE](#) has an [overall score of 72](#). I purchased it anyway and have enjoyed it immensely. I played the previous games in the series so I had a pretty good idea that it was up my alley even if the critics didn't like it as much.

For me, a score in the 70-79 range means I need to do a little more research to find out if the game will be worth it. Anything lower than 70 tells me something is probably broken and I need to be really sure what it is before I spend my money.

Again, this is just my rule of thumb. There have been games that have received rave reviews that I didn't play because I knew I wouldn't enjoy them. And there have been games with lower scores that I have really enjoyed.

One other score to keep in mind is the User Score. Metacritic allows users to rate each game on a scale of 1-10 and then averages those scores. These scores are not included in the Metascore but are shown to give you an idea of how the users of Metacritic rate the game.

Taking into account both critic and user scores can be extremely helpful in ensuring the

game you pick is one that your teenager will enjoy.



In Closing

Video games have the power to connect people like no other media. Throughout this guide, my goal has been to provide you with tips and tricks to harness that power in your relationship with your teenager. My desire has been to equip you to connect with him through video games by showing you how to get involved through talking, playing, and watching together. We have also looked at pointers on how to select a game to buy and how to evaluate the games he is playing, so that you and your teenager can have the most enjoyable experience possible.

My hope is that this guide will open opportunities for your relationship with your teenager to grow. With that in mind, I want to leave you with a question.

What will you play today?

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