

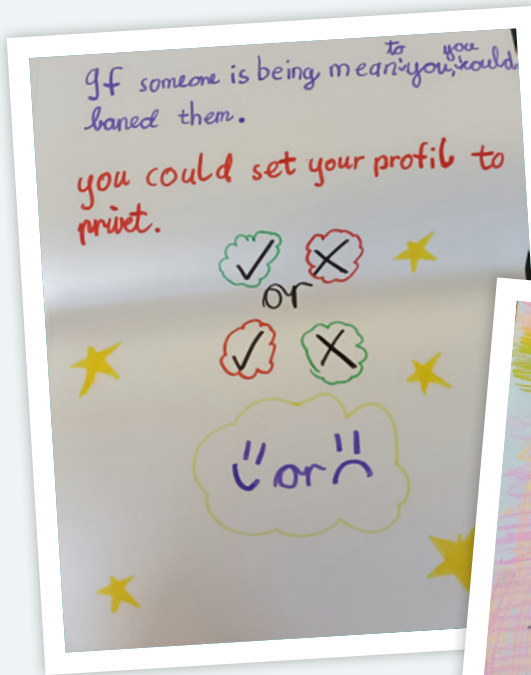


Online Gaming

Exploring the Pros
& Cons of Gaming

September 2023

Supported by
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“It’s fun but you have to be careful”
– Girl, 11

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Introduction

The Barnardos Online Safety Programme has delivered workshops about online safety to children, teachers and parents since 2014. In September 2019, we partnered with Google.org to expand our programme to reach more schools in Ireland.

Our goal is to reach 1,000 schools, or 82,000 children, by July 2024. To date in 2023, with support from Google.org we delivered over 1000 workshops in 277 schools, reaching over 40,000 children.



At Barnardos, we believe in children's rights and the right of children to be heard. We know that trends and fads can change very quickly online, and it is important that we listen to children to ensure our online workshops are relevant and up to date.

The topic of online gaming was chosen for this year's report as children increasingly spoke about the issues associated with it, as well as the role it played in their lives when we delivered our online workshops across schools.



Methodology

There was a combined approach to gathering information, using both qualitative focus groups and a quantitative survey.

We hosted five 90 minutes focus groups over the months of May and June 2023 to investigate children's experiences of online gaming, speaking directly to 55 children in 4 schools, girls and boys in 3rd- 6th class (8-13-year olds).

Two of the schools were Dublin based, two were in Cork and one was in Kilkenny.

In addition, we held two surveys about online gaming using the focus group schools. We gave one survey to children aged 8-13 (651 respondents) and we gave the other survey to their teachers (38 respondents).

Positive reflections on online gaming

It was immediately clear that the majority of children we spoke to love to game. They were quick to debate their favourite games and discuss the merits of each.

When the children were asked about the positives of gaming or what they liked about gaming online, they responded with enthusiasm and were very clear about what they liked.

Across the focus groups, there were wide ranging responses which could be categorised under the following common themes.

- Mood changing and distraction from worry or boredom
- Social aspects – connecting with and making new friends
- Learning diverse and challenging new things
- Anonymity

Enjoyment & wellbeing

Most children indicated that gaming was fun and that when they played, they could forget about what was going on in their real lives, with gaming often having a calming effect.

“It gets stuff off your mind. Say if you were sad, it would calm you down.” – Boy, 12

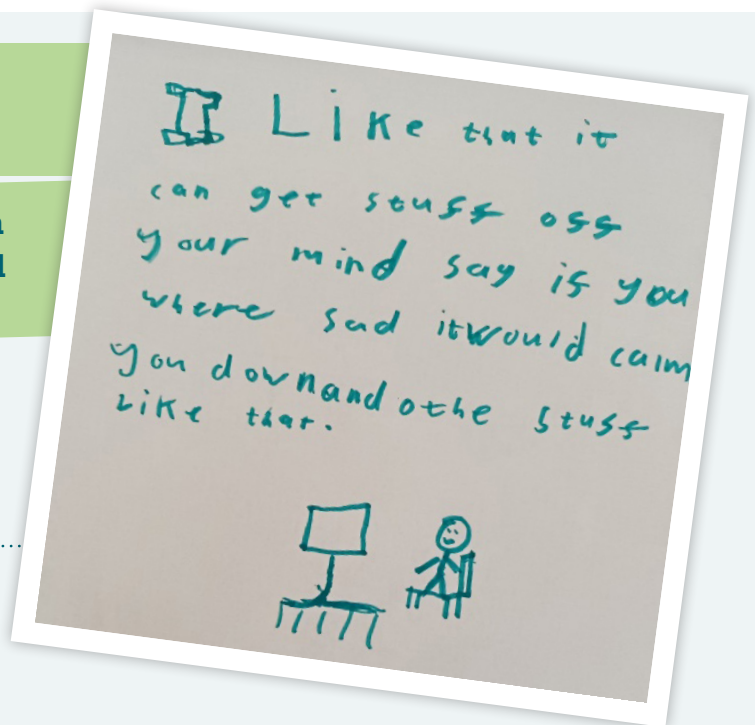
“Makes make me feel happy & when I have a good game, I have a good day” – Boy, 10



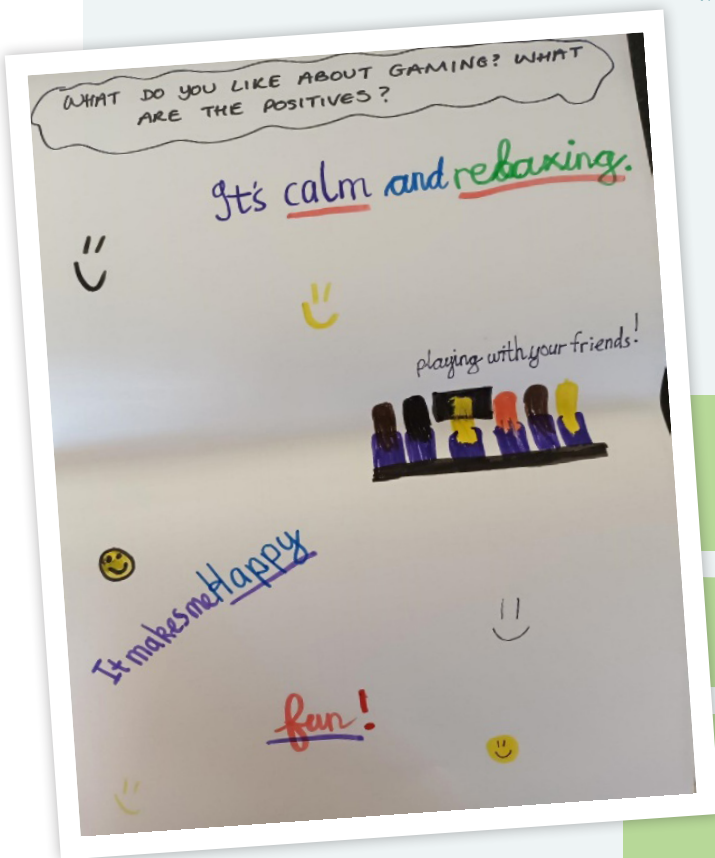
"I like gaming because it's fun, it can be exciting and can be relaxing" – Girl, 8

"I like gaming because it makes me calm & relaxed. It helps my mind if I'm worried about anything." – Girl, 10

Socialising



Nearly all children said they enjoyed gaming because it allowed them to connect with existing friends, as well as allowing them to make new ones. Some indicated that it was a great way to keep in touch with people who lived far away.

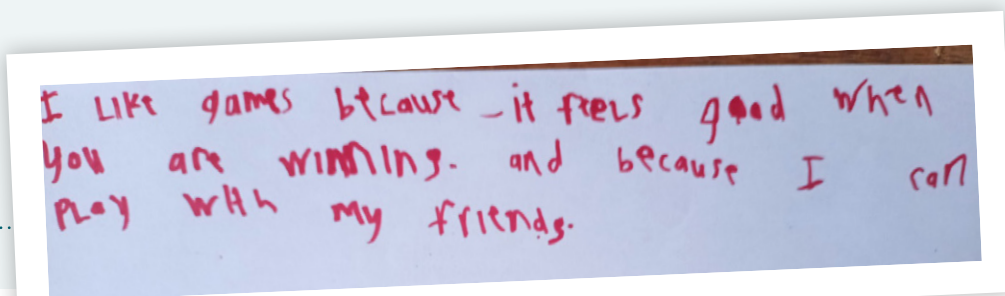


"It gives you a closer relationship with who you are playing & you can play with friends and family" – Girl, 9

"I like to play with friends and meeting people" – Boy, 11

"I like gaming because I can talk to my friends, even when I'm in my pyjamas and I can't go outside cos I'm sick." – Girl, 11

"It's good like because I have friends on the other side of the world and it's nice to connect with them" – Girl, 12



Engaging & Challenging

Children stated that they like learning new things through online games, as well as the challenging and progressive nature of gaming. They really enjoy the wide range of subjects to choose from and expressed that it was fun to learn new things.

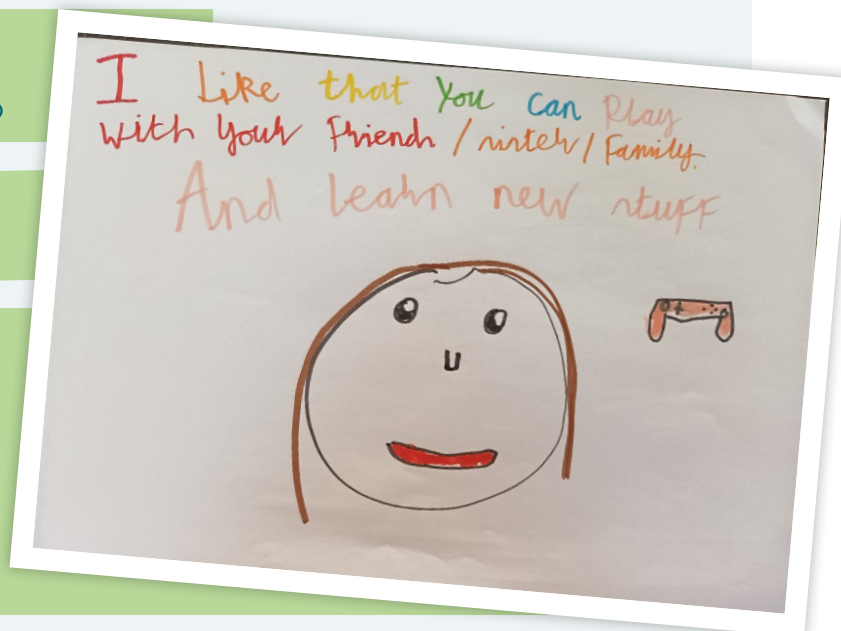
Others indicated that overcoming the challenges within a game was what they liked best.

"I like that I get to build stuff but I like the fact that you can get better at it" – Girl, 9

"Having good fun challenges to overcome, meeting new friends and discovering new games" – Boy, 9

"I like it because you like, get on to different levels and stuff" – Girl, 9

"My favourite game is called Royal High. It's a customisation game. The whole point of it is trying to save up for good items. It's kind of motivating because I get to save up for those items." – Girl, 9



Anonymity

Children expressed that they liked the anonymity that online gaming provides; they could play without people knowing who they really are or that they're behind actions that the characters in each game take.

"It doesn't matter what you do because no one really knows you." Boy, 9

"If I use a different name online, if I make a mistake nobody knows it's me" – Girl, 10

"Because of the games, I can be a princess or a racing car driver, I can pretend to be who I want" – Girl, 8

Concerns about online gaming

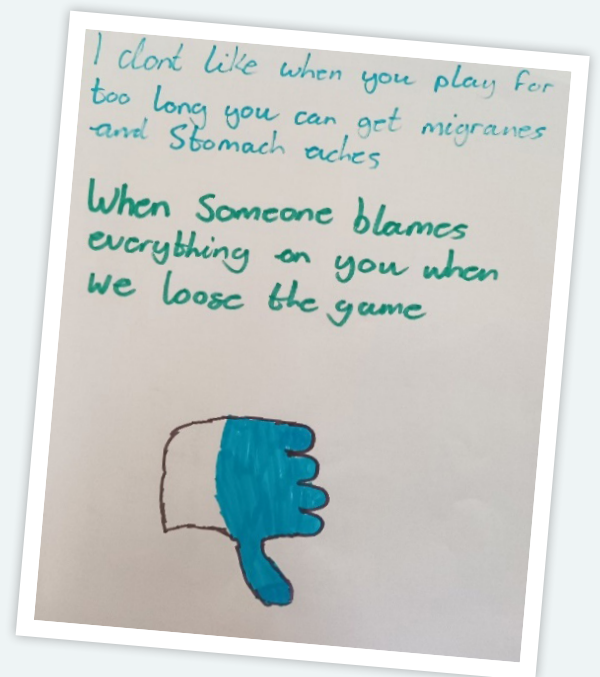
Children were keen to discuss the negative side of gaming online, what they do not like or find concerning about gaming. Their responses could be categorised under the following themes.

- Physical and emotional effects
- Unmoderated chats and cyberbullying
- Scams and strangers
- Losing and addiction

Physical and emotional effects

Nearly all the children in the focus groups described a wide range of negative physical effects, such as headaches, sore eyes and ears, and general tiredness associated with online gaming at times.

One quarter (24%) of children surveyed said that their mood always or often changes after playing video games. 40% said they never or hardly ever noticed their mood changed.



Do you ever notice your mood changes after playing video games?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	77	11.83%
Often	77	11.83%
Sometimes	239	36.71%
Never/ Hardly ever	258	39.63%

Do others around you notice your mood changes during or after you play video games?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	69	10.60%
Often	61	9.37%
Sometimes	148	22.73%
Never/ Hardly ever	373	57.30%

Children described feeling frustrated and angry and they don't like how they react to those feelings, for example, rage quitting or shouting at friends.

Twenty-seven percent of children who filled in the survey said that they "rage quit", i.e., they get so angry when they are gaming that they always or often quit or stop playing as a result.

Have you ever rage quitted e.g. stopped playing because you lost & you're angry?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	106	16.28%
Often	73	11.21%
Sometimes	223	34.25%
Never/ Hardly ever	249	38.25%

"Playing too long you can get headaches & stomach aches" – Boy, 10

"Sore ears from loud sounds, red eyes from screen time" – Girl, 9

"I don't like shouting at my friends when I get annoyed" – Boy, 11

Unmoderated chats and cyberbullying

Children noted that in online games, the chat or message functions can often be unmoderated, allowing for trash talking and mean messages to be posted. Some described feelings of sadness and hurt associated with these messages.

Others said that they had received mean messages but that they were unbothered by them as they were used to it. Most had experience with cyberbullying in games, either directly, or said they had seen others being cyberbullied in games.

When pressed about what cyberbullying looked like in games, they described constant messaging, exclusion from games, as well as false reporting so that players get banned for no reason.

Half (50%) of children responding to the survey stated they have seen other children being cyberbullied/sent mean messages, with one in seven (17%) seeing it always or often.



When I'm gaming, I've seen others being cyberbullied or sent mean messages	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	43	6.61%
Often	66	10.14%
Sometimes	219	33.64%
Never/ Hardly ever	323	49.62%

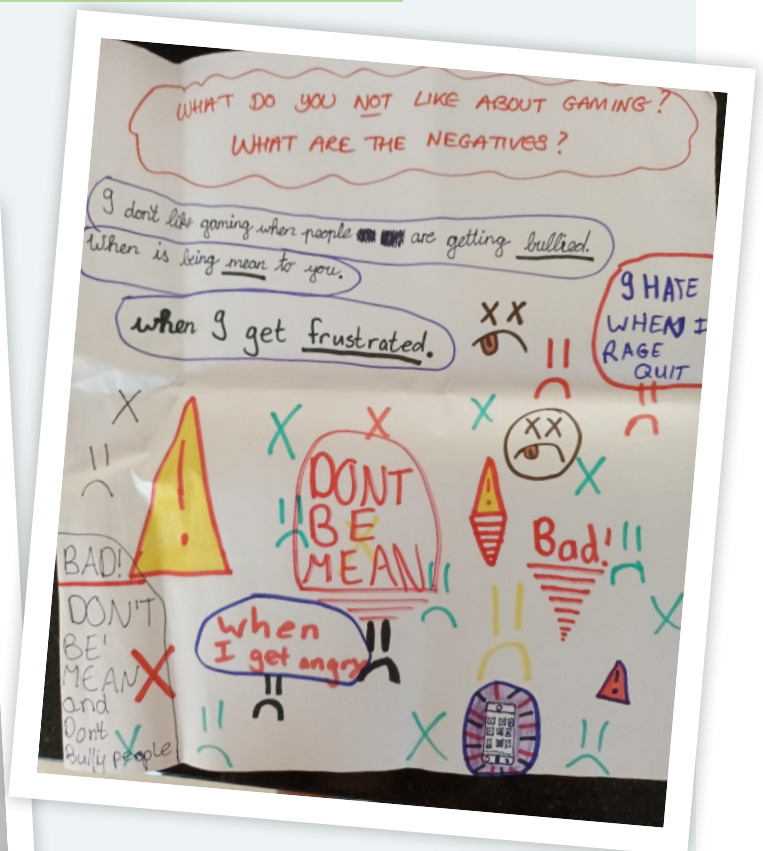
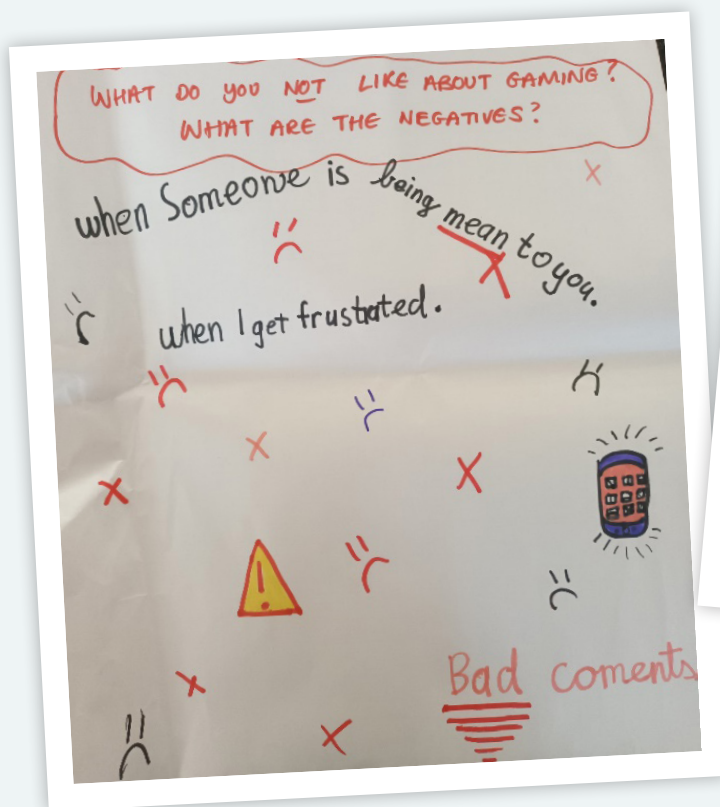
The majority of children feel that the ease of blocking and reporting is dependent on the game they are playing. Children stated that most of the time, blocking doesn't work or can be cumbersome.

They say it takes too long and too many questions have to be completed in order to get someone blocked.

“People can say anything in game chats” – Girl, 9

“People saying you are bad and kicking out of games, getting excluded from game” – Boy, 10

“People blaming you for team losing, people making fun of you” – Boy, 10



“And then people might send you mean words and so you might get strange feelings or bad comments” – Girl, 11

“I don't like gaming when people are getting bullied and when people are being mean to you” – Girl, 9

“Being toxic in a game. Emotional damage.” – Boy, 9

Scams and Strangers

Throughout the focus groups, children explained that with online gaming, you could be playing against your friends and family, as well as strangers. Some said that they disliked being followed by people that they do not know. When asked what issues this caused, they described instances of ‘teaming’ (where 2+ players within a game ‘team up’ and work to win at all costs) and ‘griefing’ (another player deliberately and intentionally irritates and harasses other players within the game) and indicated that this was quite common within games.

They expressed frustration, anger and annoyance at their games being ruined by strangers.

Children also said that people can pretend to be children and try to get information from them. They described feeling weird when strangers asked questions. They spoke about isolated instances of in game dating and being asked by strangers to go on dates. More than one in three children (35%) said that when they play games online, they play with people they do not know or have never met in real life.

Over one in five (21%) said they have often or always been asked a personal question by a stranger.

When I am gaming, I play with people I don't know or who I've never met in real life	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	121	18.59%
Often	111	17.05%
Sometimes	209	32.10%
Never/ Hardly ever	210	32.26%

A stranger online has asked me personal questions in a game	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	16	2.46%
Often	28	4.30%
Sometimes	89	13.67%
Never/ Hardly ever	518	79.57%

“I don’t like people following me that I don’t know.” – Girl, 10

“Adults pretending to be kids and asking questions” – Girl, 8

“There are some silly children out there that like online date, but you don’t know what your ‘boyfriend’ looks like, how old they are. It’s really weird. And the little girl is getting tricked.” – Girl, 10

“I don’t like people teaming. Like say, two people they were like playing by themselves, and they are playing in the same game. And then they recognise each other and they team up and start killing others, even if they aren’t on the same team. At the end, one of them betrays the other.” – Boy, 9

Losing and addiction

The topic of losing came up frequently, children stating that they hated losing and described feelings of anxiety, anger and frustration when this happened. Some children rage quit when this happened because they couldn’t progress past a level in a game.

Other players ‘griefing’ and ‘teaming’ and not being fair within the rules of a game were reasons for children to lose games and rage quit. The pressure of potentially losing and being ‘trash talked’ were reported to cause negative feelings and some children reported not being able to control these emotions and feelings.

Children also recognised that playing games online can be addictive and if they play for too long, it can have a negative impact on them. The majority are aware that they are unable to moderate their time when online gaming and know that they rely on someone telling them to stop gaming. They were clear that unlimited time online is not good for children.

Almost one in five (18%) of children who completed the survey said they always or often found it difficult to stop playing video games. 40% said they never or hardly ever had an issue stopping.

Over half (51%) of children said their parents/friends say they should spend less time online. One in seven (14%) children said that they often or always do not get enough sleep because they stay up gaming.

Do your parents or friends say you should spend less time playing online games?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	46	7.07%
Often	54	8.29%
Sometimes	230	35.33%
Never/ Hardly ever	321	49.31%

Do you find it difficult to stop playing video games?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	57	8.76%
Often	61	9.37%
Sometimes	277	42.55%
Never/ Hardly ever	256	39.32%

Do you ever not get enough sleep because you were up playing games online?	No of Responses	Percentage
Always	52	7.99%
Often	37	5.68%
Sometimes	132	20.28%
Never/ Hardly ever	430	66.05%

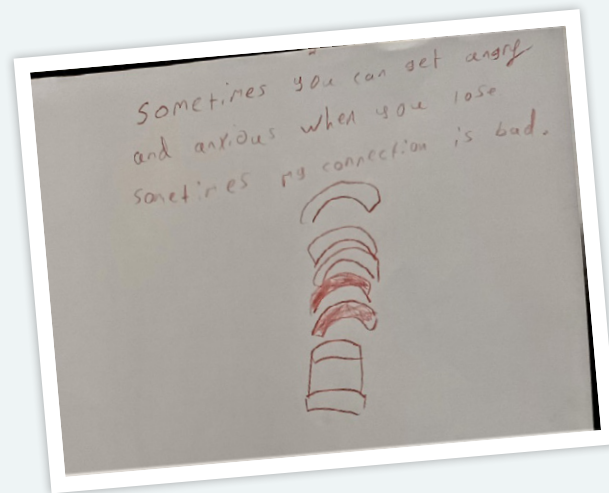
“I don’t like it when I lose my game.” – Boy, 9

“Sometimes it can be addictive and you can get angry if you lose.” – Girl, 10

“I don’t like the feeling of doing nothing with my day except for gaming. I don’t like going to bed and thinking ‘I could have walked 50km’, but all I did was game all day.” – Girl, 11

“Getting addicted and it affects mental health.” – Boy, 10

“Frustration with the game - You can get really mad if you're playing bad” – Girl, 11



Reforming online gaming

The focus groups were asked what they would like to change about gaming online and what a perfect and safe game would look like to them. The children had clear ideas about how to improve games online.

Most said they would like to make reporting and blocking functions easier and more effective, making it quicker to report and reducing the number of players that have to report someone in order to get them banned. They also indicated that:

- Gaming companies should review and block people more quickly. It should be more straightforward to report an abusive individual.
- More moderated chat functions should be introduced to eradicate mean messages or allow only nice messages.



- Private server functions should be introduced where you can play offline and online safely and can allow for playing with limited/invited people.
- Games should be free from spam and advertisements.
- Restrictions should be increased on in-game purchasing in children’s games.

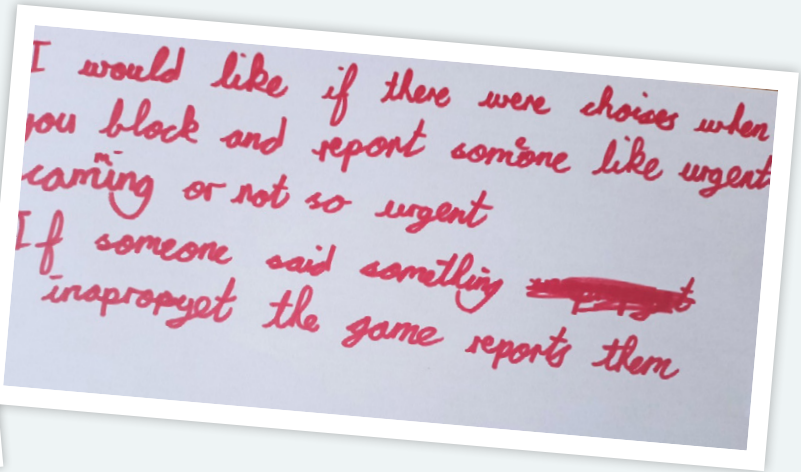
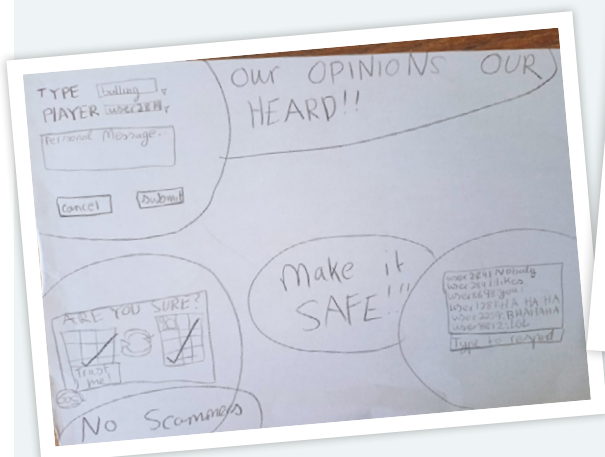
“So I probably make the reporting, would be easier to report and you don’t have to ask so many personal questions and stuff when reporting” – Girl, 9

“I hope to see a game with a time limit and you can only play with people who you friended, so people outside that you don’t know (private server). It automatically turns off at night so people can’t play it at night.” – Girl, 10

“Chats are moderated and everyone gets treated the same. There is a timer that goes off every 30 minutes and it says on the screen ‘would you like to keep playing’. The screen brightness goes down in the evening.” – Girl, 11

“My ideal game is that if you’re blocking or reporting someone, it works straight away so that people don’t get a second chance. Our chats are more moderated because there could be younger users there” – Girl, 10

“Another thing is that this one girl did was this experiment where she would go in a game saying please report me please report me and she would like give you something So like most people reported her then she got banned for three days and she did that experiment to prove that somebody doesn’t look through the chats or like what they say at all.” – Girl, 9



Teacher Survey

Thirty-eight teachers, who have students in 3rd to 6th class, completed a survey on their pupils' online gaming and the affect it has on them and their engagement with others in class, as well as their ability to engage in school. Four in five teachers said that some of the children in their class are distracted/tired in class due to gaming the night before. Half of teachers said that some of the children in their class do not engage with homework due to gaming.

Some of the children in my class are distracted/tired in my class due to spending time gaming the night before	No of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	17	45%
Agree	14	36%
Don't know	1	3%
Disagree	6	16%
Total	38	100%

Some of the children in my class are not engaged with homework due to gaming	No of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	16%
Agree	13	34%
Don't know	3	8%
Disagree	14	36%
Strongly disagree	2	6%
Total	38	100%

Two thirds of teachers (63%) said that most of the children in their class have had a positive experience while gaming. Only one in ten (9%) said they did not. However, around three-quarters (74%) said that some of the children in their class have been upset by mean comments they received while playing online games.

Most of the children in my class have had a positive experience while gaming	No of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	13%
Agree	19	50%
Don't know	11	28%
Disagree	3	9%
Total	38	100%

Some of the children in my class have been upset by mean comments sent while playing online games	No of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	14	37%
Agree	14	37%
Don't know	5	13%
Disagree	3	8%
Strongly disagree	2	5%
Total	38	100%

Additionally, almost three in five teachers (58%) agreed that some of the children in their class would say they are addicted to gaming. Only 13% disagreed.

Some of the children in my class would say they are 'addicted' to gaming	No of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	9	24%
Agree	13	34%
Don't know	11	29%
Disagree	3	8%
Strongly disagree	2	5%
Total	38	100%

Conclusion & recommendations

It is clear from children and young people that online gaming is an important part of many of their lives and for the most part, it offers positive and enjoyable experiences, allow them to build relationships and encourage individual learning and growth.

However, it is clear that there are real concerns and issues around the world of online gaming. Children and young people are aware that there are some negatives, such as worries around addiction, bad mood when losing, scams and the danger of strangers. Teachers also highlighted negative effect online gaming can have at times on education, with children being over tired and unable to concentrate.

Based on the insights and experiences of young people who spoke to us we have set out recommendations below that would improve the safety and enjoyment of online gaming for children in Ireland.

- Gaming companies should review reports of abuse more and block people being abusive more quickly. Reporting such people should be made more straightforward.
- There should be greater moderation of chat functions within online games to protect children and young people.
- Online games directed at children should have no options for in game purchases.

Parents should be supported to better inform themselves of their children's online gaming, the positives associated with it as well as the potential harms



At Barnardos, we have been helping vulnerable children in Ireland since the 1960s.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential - regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability.'

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