

4 WARNING SIGNS



TO WATCH
FOR IN

YOUR GAMER



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If you have a teen—especially a teen boy—you probably have a gamer. But gaming is a double-edged sword: on the one hand fun and freeing, on the other addictive and risky. Make sure you're up-to-date by keeping an eye on certain behaviors.

BY GARRICK CONNER



This is such a difficult culture in which to be a parent, especially a Christian parent. The shifting norms in our society have left many of us feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to know how to appropriately respond to our kids. As a result, our responses are better described as reactions.

As a pastor and counselor, my frequent conversations with parents often capture the gravity of the inadequacy so many share. Parents feel intimidated by the ever-changing landscape of technology and social media. As one recently told me, "There's no way I can ever keep up with all the changes and updates, so I just have to trust God with my kids."

Honest statement. Terrible strategy.

Unfortunately, this hands-off approach is becoming all too common among parents today. And let's bear in mind that just because something is normal doesn't make it right.

So, let's talk honestly about one aspect of the online world that you may not fully understand: online gaming.

Most of us parents grew up in the era of Atari and Nintendo. It was fun to stay up late on weekends, playing competitively with friends and family members. And they were the ones we talked with, in person.

Fast forward to today. Teen culture has become marked by a dark side of online gaming, many of which fall into the category of virtual reality.

And let's be honest. Teens have always tested boundaries, balked at rules, and pulled away from parents. But it has never been easier for kids to minimize the influence of their parents than today. It used to be that teens could be influenced by their friends when they were actually with their friends, but when they left their friends, parental influence was restored to some degree. In today's culture, kids are always with their friends—through texting, social media, and other online communities.



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But thanks to online gaming, kids are being influenced by people who are complete strangers—not friends in any way, shape, or form. It's a culture that is increasingly toxic, and the implications for our teens are serious. As the period of social adolescence continues to be extended into the young adult years, this problem will continue to snowball.

Aside from entertainment and competition, online gaming communities are notorious for anonymous conversations, hostile banter, bullying, and shaming. If you're one of those parents who has erred on the side of trust, then your teen may be part of this increasingly dangerous paradigm. Here are a few red flags to watch for:

1 > EXTENDED PERIODS OF ISOLATION.

Kids typically look for any opportunity to be by themselves—especially when the only alternative is hanging out with their family. But if your kid is spending hours of time alone in his room—especially with his phone or computer—this could signal emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, or even self-harm.

It's possible that he's being harassed or bullied by an online stranger. Or maybe he's simply witnessed this happening to others and feels conflicted about what to do. If your teen is victim to the online gaming culture, he may feel hopeless, especially if talking with his parents might trigger an angry onslaught. So approach with caution and grace.

2 > STRONG DENIAL OF TIME SPENT GAMING.

When confronted about the number of hours spent online, it's pretty normal for teens to minimize or deny there's a problem. But with the recent addition of the Screen Time tracker on iPhone, it's a lot easier to get your hands on some pretty hard evidence. There's even an option for parents to set time limits on a particular app. How your teen responds to that kind of parental oversight will give an indication of just how deeply connected he is to the gaming community.

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3 > EFFORTLESS EXCUSES.

It's quite common for teens to make excuses. In fact, I'd argue that it's in their unwritten job description. It's what they do. But take note of the kinds of excuses being offered. Many social media and gaming apps now record "streaks"—a measure of how many days in a row they've interacted with a specific individual. And parents, you must understand that it's terribly un-cool to be the one who breaks a streak. In my opinion, it's a form of social manipulation, but it works. People keep coming back to play more games, keep more streaks, and spend more money.

4 > INTENSE EMOTIONS, ESPECIALLY WHEN LIMITS ARE SET.

While it can be reasonably argued that all teens experience periods of intense emotions, often driven by changing hormones, what I'm talking about here is more than that. Angry outbursts, restlessness, and depression can show up seemingly out of nowhere—especially after limits have been set on a particular game. In fact, such responses could signal an addiction. And yes, these intense emotions can indicate withdrawal. That's why Internet Gaming Disorder was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). There are treatment centers popping up all over the country to deal with this very issue.

All these factors, when combined with marked interference in everyday activities such as homework and chores, should be cause for concern—but not panic. If you think your teen may have an issue stemming from online gaming or other online communities, don't hesitate to contact a local student pastor, school counselor, or other helping professional for support.

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