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# GAMING BEYOND THE BASICS



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**Strategies to support your  
young Autistic gamer**



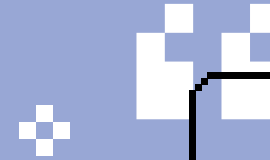


# GAMING BEYOND THE BASICS



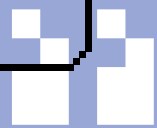
**Strategies to support your young Autistic gamer**

# INTRODUCTION



“I think that Autistic people benefit from a supported experience rather than one that contains exclusions. Balance of online and offline time is important as well as inside and outside time. Having a community of gamers that create and support a safe and balanced online gaming experience with a blend of neurotypical and neurodivergent participants will help create a feeling of inclusion.”

ATHEN, A PARTICIPANT IN OUR SURVEY ON HEALTHY GAMING



**Video gaming provides Autistic children and young people with many benefits that supports their engagement in friendships, inclusion in social environments, and development of collaborative skills. This guide has been developed to support parents and carers with practical strategies to help ensure the young Autistic gamer in their life has a balanced, positive and fun relationship with video gaming.**

A quick note before you continue reading, we use the term ‘video gaming’ throughout this guide. We know Autistic children and young people play a wide variety of video games, and these can be both offline (requiring no Internet connection) and online (over the Internet). Regardless of whether your young gamer is playing video games on or offline, the information in this guide applies to both types of video gaming.

This project is funded by the eSafety Commissioner.





# NAVIGATING YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES



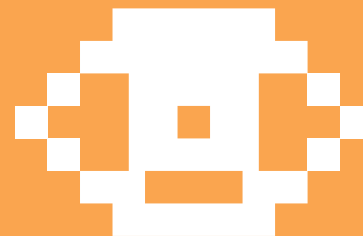


**As the parent or carer of an Autistic child or young person who games, you might also be a gamer or have an interest in gaming yourself, or not interested in it at all. You don't need to be an avid gamer or an expert, but it is important that you know the content of the games that your child or young person is playing.**



By knowing the content and typical players of the video games being played, you can make sure it's suitable for them. For example, knowing that Minecraft® is about building and creating, and that it's popular with children and teenagers, can help you to know if it is appropriate for your child. Getting to know the content can also give you the opportunity to observe how your child or young person talks to others, or is spoken to, while gaming. Importantly, it also shows that you value their interests. Autistic people can have strong passions, one of which may be video gaming. By taking an interest, you're showing them that you value what's important to them.

Here are some strategies that you can use to explore your child or young person's gaming interactions, and the content of the video games that they're playing:





## CHECK THE RATINGS, OR WATCH A GAMEPLAY VIDEO

Finding out the rating of the video game that they are playing, or want to play, is a great first step. You can then use these ratings, as well as your own assessment of your child's maturity levels, to guide what you allow your child to play.

Often video game ratings will give you a brief description of the content of the game and will help you to know whether a game will be appropriate for your child or young person. For example, Pokémon™: Let's Go, Pikachu! has a rating of PG, and is described as including mild themes and violence, as well as online interactivity. The Call of Duty®: WWII video game is rated 18+ and is described as including high impact violence and online interactivity. These are just a couple of examples of the type of ratings and definitions that you might come across, but for more details about the different rating classifications, check out our Gaming 101 guide.

You could also watch a YouTube® video of another person playing the video game that your child is interested in playing in order to find out whether it is appropriate for your child.



## WATCH YOUR GAMER PLAY

Your child or young person might have games that they play already that you don't know much about. To learn more about the video games they are playing, watch them play. This will allow you to assess how suitable the games they are playing are for them, help you to understand a bit more about their gaming world and make it easier for you to engage in conversations around gaming with them. Plus, children often enjoy telling adults about their favourite games. Asking your child to explain to you what they are doing in the game can help you to understand the game's content and bond with your child over their interests.

## PLAY TOGETHER

If your child is interested in a game that has a multiplayer option, you could try playing it with them. By playing with them, you're able to better understand how the game works, if it's suitable, and whether it's safe. It's also a great way to bond. Gaming together encourages interaction, communication, and creates a shared interest. Finally, playing together with your child can help you to understand how that game might work in online multiplayer. For example, if you are able to use voice chat while you play together, you know that your child would be able to use voice chat while playing the game in online multiplayer.



## TEACH THEM ABOUT RESPONSIBILITIES AND SELF-REGULATION

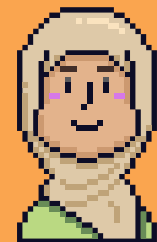
While parents and carers are responsible for making sure that their child or young person video games safely, gaming can also be a fantastic way for your Autistic gamer to build their skills around responsibility and self-regulation.

Sometimes parents and carers can struggle to get their young gamer to finish the video game they are playing to come to eat dinner, go to an appointment, get ready for school or head to bed. For young Autistic gamers, this can often be because they find the transition difficult, or find it hard to stop a task or initiate a task.

Talk to your child about which video game they are wanting to play and understand how long it will take them. This is important, as some games can only be saved at particular points, so your child may be unable to stop playing instantly without losing their progress. If they can't finish it within the time they have, work together with them to decide which video games would be more appropriate to play, like a game that is quick and easy to put down. Alternatively, you could provide them with a visual timer so that they can see how much time they have left to keep playing before they need to stop. It can also be useful to talk to your child about how each game they play makes them feel. This can help your child to pick games to play that are appropriate for how they feel in that moment. For example, if your child is already feeling stressed, a game that tends to make them feel frustrated may not be the right choice at that time. In future, your child or young person can practice making these kinds of responsible decisions and managing difficult transitions by choosing a suitable game to play before dinner. This is a skill that can also help them to balance video gaming with other responsibilities.



**TIP:** The eSafety Commissions eSafety Guide is a great resource you can use to learn more about popular video games and social media platforms.



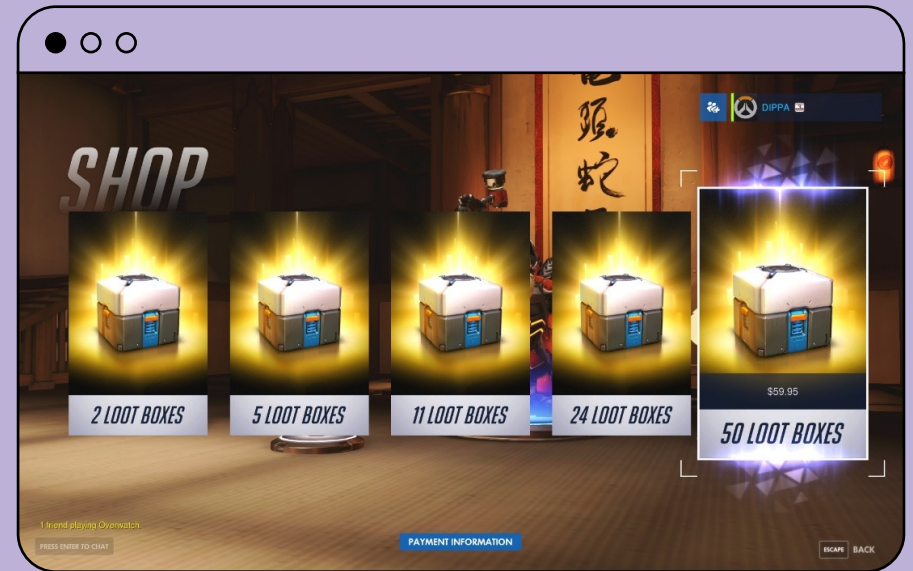


# ONLINE PURCHASES

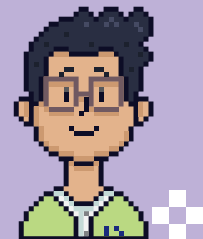
While some video games can cost money to purchase and play, there are others that are free to download and enjoy. Sometimes free games include items or additions that you can purchase within the game, and they cost money. These are sometimes referred to as in-app purchases, in-game purchases or micro-transactions.

There are many types of micro-transactions that can be made including the purchase of in-game currencies, character customisations, in-game items like weapons, or loot boxes. Micro-transactions can also affect your gameplay, making the video game more difficult if you don't buy them. If you have a payment method set up on your device, at times it can be hard to tell that you're spending real money.

It's important to have a clear discussion with your young Autistic gamer about spending money on video games and setting some rules and expectations. For example, you might ask them to come and speak to you before making any purchases. You could also tell them to come to you whenever they're not sure if a game is asking for real money. For a young person who is ready to further build their skills around responsibility, you might provide them with a monthly allowance to make in-game purchases. To ensure they are learning and using that allowance wisely, you might ask them to provide a list of what they would like to purchase along with how much each item costs before giving them the money. You may also choose to buy your child a gift card for the online store or game they're using to teach your child about budgeting, as they will be unable to spend more than what is on the gift card.



**TIP:** In 2020, the Australian Classification Board started including micro-transactions in rating descriptions. Now, a game that includes micro-transactions will have "in-game purchases" listed in their rating description.

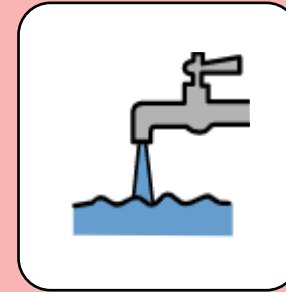




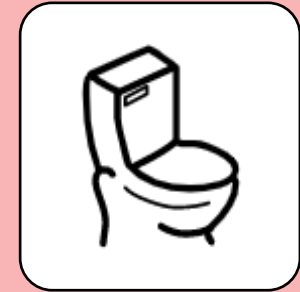
# INTEROCEPTION

**Interoception is the sense that allows our body to be aware of what's going on internally. It helps us understand when we need to act on sensations, such as feeling hot, hungry, or to self-regulate in other ways. Autistic children and young people may need some support with interoception.**

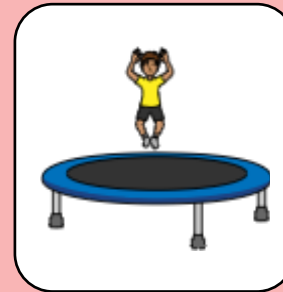
When Autistic children and young people are passionate about a particular task and are focusing on it, it can sometimes be challenging to switch to another task and tune into their needs. This also includes attending to interoceptive sensations. Some people who play video games like to use a visual timer, or a timer that vibrates to prompt them to take a break from the game. An example could be setting timers to game for 30 minutes and then taking a five-minute break. This time may vary depending on the age and needs of your young Autistic gamer or on the game they are playing. For some Autistic children and young people, having a visual menu or written list is a good reminder of what activities they can do during a break. For example, the free time activities menu shown here has a mixture of recommended comfort tasks and activities that can be done on a break. Some children might enjoy having their free time menu including images of their favourite video game characters completing the activities.



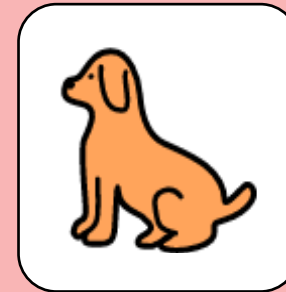
WATER



TOILET



TRAMPOLINE



PLAY WITH DOG



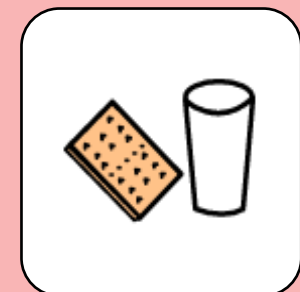
DRAW



SCOOTER



LISTEN TO MUSIC



SNACK



# TURN-TAKING, WINNING AND LOSING



**Video games can support Autistic children and young people to learn about taking turns and manage losing. Here are some strategies that you can use to support your young Autistic gamer manage winning and losing and turn-taking:**

- Emphasise the fun in participating and collaborating with others by playing a video game with them. Use this as an opportunity to model the behaviour that you want them to learn and have a conversation with them around how they should treat others, and be treated, when playing video games. For example, if you lose when playing the video game, you could congratulate them on winning and say that you had fun.
- Encourage your child or young person to try a game that uses avatars, as this can support turn-taking. Nintendo® games are particularly useful for this, as they have specific recognisable characters that gamers can choose to play as. The Nintendo game Mario Party™ can be useful for practicing this skill as you use your avatars to compete in a virtual board game.
- Encourage your child or young person to engage in emotional regulation strategies. These might include stimming, using fidget toys or sensory toys, or practicing breathing techniques. It's important to identify your child's preferences and work with them to find the strategies for emotional regulation that work for them.

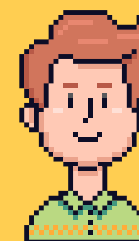


# KEEPING VIDEO GAMING ENJOYABLE AND HEALTHY

**If your Autistic child or young person's video gaming is starting to become unhealthy or causing them stress, here are some strategies to make sure it stays fun and healthy:**

- Help your Autistic child or young person to plan which games are best for certain times of the day or for certain periods of time. Shorter and easier games might be better suited to play during the week, while longer games or games that take more focus may better suit the weekend.
- Work with your young gamer to create fair and reasonable time limits for gaming. It's recommended that a three-hour session is a good limit for a consecutive session. For younger children, this may only apply on the weekends or during school holidays.
- Encourage your child or young person not to play every day as this allows them to take a step back and evaluate what they want to do. Providing them with a visual schedule can be a helpful way to assist them with this.
- Get them involved or encourage them to participate in other activities outside of gaming like sports or outdoor activities.

**TIP:** If you find that they have lost interest in other activities, look at the video games they are playing and see if you can find a non-video game equivalent. Some examples include:



- Getting them to play or watch soccer or basketball if they like to play video games like the FIFA® or NBA® 2K® series
- Getting them to try cycling or playing with a remote-control car if they are interested in racing games
- Taking them to an escape room or involving them in reading or creative writing if they like playing adventure video games
- Encouraging them to try LEGO® building if they enjoy building games like Minecraft
- Getting them into activities like paintball or archery if they like shooter games. However, it's important to be aware that paintball can be a high sensory activity
- Exposing them to the theatre or Dungeons and Dragons® if they like role-playing games.



# UNDERSTANDING THEIR VIDEO GAMING RELATIONSHIPS

✕ **Video gaming is a great way for Autistic children and young people to develop friendships, particularly for those who find making friends in-real life challenging. As online friendships support the way that Autistic people communicate, they can be quite common amongst Autistic people.**

In some instances, Autistic children and young people may also come across someone who is being unkind or not very friendly. For young Autistic people, it can sometimes be difficult to tell, either online or not in-person, when somebody is a friend, a stranger, or a bully. Deception can also be experienced more often by Autistic people as reading non-Autistic people's tone, intentions, and social cues can be tricky.

There are many strategies that you can use to explore your child or young person's gaming interactions, and the content of the video games that they're playing.



## CREATE SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND EXPECTATIONS

Talking with your Autistic child or young person around what is acceptable gaming behaviour helps to establish boundaries and a shared understanding. Here are some examples of good expectations that you can establish around video gaming with your young gamer:

- They have the right to be treated nicely, fairly, and with respect
- Other people they are playing with should also be treated nicely, fairly, and with respect
- Gaming should be fun or challenging to a comfortable and appropriate level – if they are getting frustrated, upset, or worried, it might be time to take a break or choose another game
- If somebody is being unkind or inappropriate to them because of video gaming, they should come and tell you about it – knowing that they won't get in trouble, and you will work through a solution together.

If children or young people think that they might be told off for their video gaming interactions or banned from playing in the future, they are more likely to avoid talking about it and seeking help. Make sure they know that they can tell you about any issues or concerns they might have without shame, judgement or getting in trouble. Inappropriate behaviour is inappropriate whether it's online, or in person. It's important to remember that if a person is acting inappropriately online, the problem lies with that person's actions, not with the game.

## TEACH YOUR AUTISTIC GAMER TO BLOCK AND REPORT

Many video games allow you to block or report other players for inappropriate behaviour. Explore the games that your child or young person is playing, find out what blocking and reporting functions they have, and then show them how to use these functions. It's also important to talk to your child or young person about when it is and is not appropriate to block or report another player.

Reporting a player can sometimes lead to their suspension or ban from the video game. While bad behaviour should not be tolerated, it's important to help your young gamer distinguish between what is fair gameplay and what is not to avoid unfairly disadvantaging another gamer. It's also important to explicitly teach Autistic gamers the difference between feeling upset because they lost or something felt unfair, and feeling upset because of behaviour that is not appropriate. By helping to teach Autistic gamers how to recognise and manage inappropriate behaviour, you are supporting them to build life-long skills that they can use in real-world situations as an adult.



# PRIVACY AND SAFETY



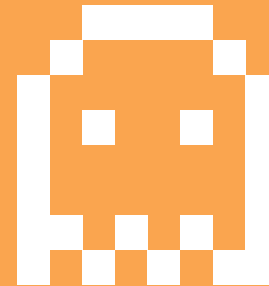
**Equipping your Autistic gamer with the tools they need to protect their privacy and manage unsafe situations is important for both them, and you as the parent or carer. Here are some strategies that you can use to help keep your child or young person safe:**

## TALK TO THEM ABOUT SAFE SHARING OF INFORMATION

Sometimes children and young people are told not to share personal information when playing games online with others, especially with people they have not met in-real life before, but they aren't told specifically what not to share, or why. Being clear and direct about what is appropriate and not appropriate to share with others when gaming is especially important for Autistic children and young people, because they can sometimes miss neurotypical social expectations that aren't said out loud.

"Having a list or outline of restricted topics and pieces of information clearly set out from the beginning of their online activities will help young people with autism know their social boundaries."

LUCY, A PARTICIPANT IN OUR SURVEY ON HEALTHY GAMING





**Using a traffic light system can be a great aid to help parents and carers clearly explain to their young gamer what they should or shouldn't be sharing. This visual here is an example of how you might create your traffic light system.**



Green signals information that is ok to share



Amber signals information that might be able to be shared but this needs to be checked with the parent or carer first.



Red signals information that should never be shared

It can also be helpful to explain to your child or young person that when they share information online, it may not always be used in the way they think or are told it will be.

### CREATE STRONG USERNAMES AND PASSWORDS

Ensure your child or young person is using strong passwords and usernames when playing video games. Avoid using any personal information, such as names, age, or location, when creating usernames. It's also recommended that gender isn't included. This makes sure that your child or young person can't be identified.

The passwords that your young gamer uses for gaming accounts should be strong. Make sure that their passwords are unpredictable and not used in too many other places. It's recommended that passwords contain random numbers, letters, and punctuation to ensure that they can't be easily guessed.



### SET UP PRIVACY SETTINGS

Many video gaming devices have privacy settings that can be adjusted. For online gaming accounts, these might affect who can see your child or young person's profile or be their friend. Make time to go through these settings with your young gamer so you can be assured that they are strong and secure. For more ways to ensure your young gamers privacy when playing video games, check out our Parental Controls information sheet at [amaze.org.au/gaming](http://amaze.org.au/gaming).





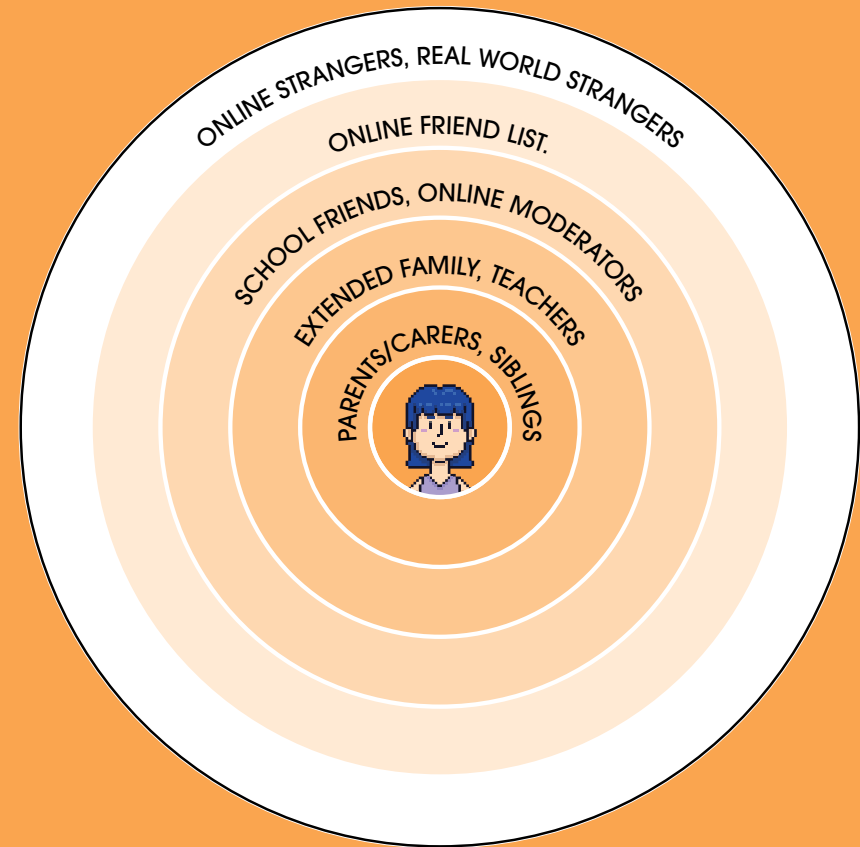


## USE A SOCIOGRAM OR CIRCLES OF TRUST

The concept of privacy can be abstract and challenging for some children and young people, especially if they are Autistic. It can be helpful when having conversations about privacy with your young Autistic gamer to draw a diagram like the one shown here. This is called a circles of trust diagram (or sociogram). This diagram shows the different relationships that your child has, whether they are people your child sees daily or online friends. A sociogram can be text or images/photos. This example shows the circles of trust diagram that a young Autistic gamer might use. The young gamers parents, carers, and family have been included in the most inner circle to demonstrate that they are closest to the Autistic gamer. This is then followed by people who the gamer would also be able to trust, such as extended family, teachers and school friends. As we get closer to the outside of the circle, this includes people that the young gamer should be less trustworthy of, including friends they have never met in-person and only know online as well as strangers.

A child or young person might experience changes in who they trust and how much they trust someone as it can change over time and when circumstances change. They might meet their online friends in person and develop a face-to-face friendship or online strangers might become online friends. It's important that you talk to your child or young person about this and explain how these relationships might change and what to do when they do.

A circles of trust diagram like the one shown here can also be used with a traffic light system like the one shown in the "Talk to them about safe sharing of information" section. This can help your child to connect each type of person in the circles of trust diagram to information that they should or should not share with that person.





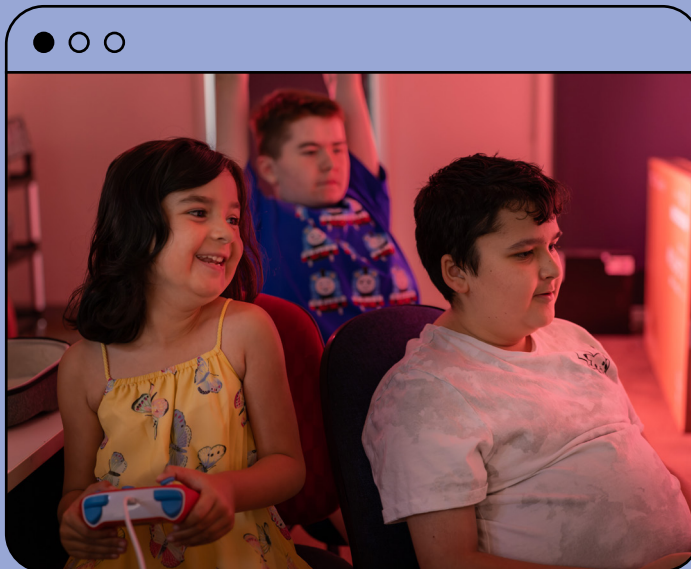


# CONNECTING WITH THE VIDEO GAMING COMMUNITY



**Joining a video gaming group can help your young Autistic gamer socialise and make connections with other kids who have similar interests. It can also provide the opportunity for your child or young person to learn from their peers and see examples of other young gamers modelling healthy gaming behaviours. There are a number of groups across the country, but below are some examples of groups that currently exist:**

- Social video gaming groups hosted by neurodivergent gaming experts like Next Level Collaboration and The Lab.
- Gaming interest groups hosted by the I CAN Network that allows young Autistic people to talk about their passions for gaming in general, or specific games like Minecraft, Pokémon and Roblox™.
- An eSports League which provides high school students with access to eSports at all levels.
- Autism-specific Minecraft servers like Autcraft and YellowCraft. These are servers that have been designed for and are only available to Autistic gamers and their families. To join Autcraft you need to apply through their website. YellowCraft is a collaboration between Yellow Ladybugs and Next Level Collaboration and is only open to members of the Yellow Ladybugs community. If you are interested in registering, you will need to contact Yellow Ladybugs.

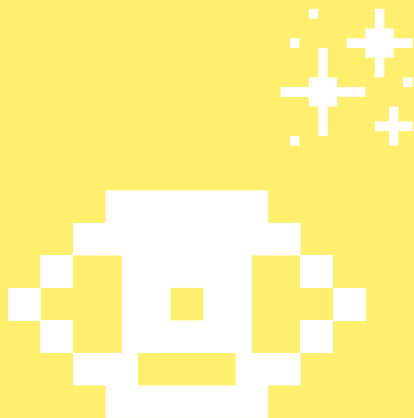




# WHERE TO GO FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

**Below is a list of recommended services, websites and resources that can provide additional information or support.**

- Speak to a GP, Paediatrician, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist, or Speech Therapist. It is important that these professionals take a neuro-affirming and strengths-based approach with your Autistic child or young person.
- The [Taming Gaming website](#) is a useful resource for parents to learn more about gaming. It features a database of almost 2,000 video games, as well as around 200 board games. It also includes lists that suggest games that would suit a specific type of person, need, or theme - one of which is specific to Autistic gamers.
- [Good Game Spawn Point \(ABC Me\)](#) - a TV series about gaming for younger gamers where they only review and discuss games rated G or PG.
- [Positive Partnerships - Interoception](#)
- [Kelly Mahler - Interoception resources](#)





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our thanks to Jess Rowlings and Dr Matthew Harrison from Next Level Collaboration and Andrew Kinch from GameAware for the expertise and support they offered in development of this guide.



## REFERENCES

- Boardmaker® Picture Communication Symbols® by Tobii Dynavox have been used in this guide.
- Positive Partnerships. (2022). Interoception. Retrieved from <https://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/resources/practical-tools-information-sheets/interoception>



Autism Connect is a free, national Autism helpline, providing independent and expert information over phone, email and webchat. For more information about Autism, or to talk about your situation, contact our Autism Connect Advisors via:

**Phone:** 1300 308 699

**Email:** [info@autismconnect.org.au](mailto:info@autismconnect.org.au)

**Website and webchat:**  
[www.amaze.org.au/autismconnect](http://www.amaze.org.au/autismconnect)

Available from 8am to 7pm, Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays).

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If you or someone you know is in danger and in need of immediate help, contact 000.

**Lifeline** – National free crisis counselling service with 24-hour crisis support

Phone: 13 11 14

Website: [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** – Free, confidential 24/7 online and phone counselling service for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years.

Phone: 1800 55 1800

Website: [www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

**Parentline** – Free counselling and advice service for parents and carers.

ACT Phone: (02) 6287 3833

QLD & NT Phone: 1300 30 1300

NSW Phone: 13 00 52

SA Phone: 1300 364 100

TAS Phone: 1800 808 178

VIC Phone: 13 22 89

WA Phone: 08) 9368 9368 or 1800 111 546 for country callers

**Note:** Parentline operating hours differ between states and territories, please check the Parentline website for your preferred location for times.

This project is funded by the eSafety Commissioner.



**Phone:** (03) 9657 1600

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**Website:** [www.amaze.org.au](http://www.amaze.org.au)

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