

game OVER



Toolkit 3 For Parents

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Table of Contents

1. Problematic Online Gaming (POG)	3
2. Simple explanations about Problematic Online Gaming (POG)	4
3. Vulnerability of adolescents to online gambling	5
4. Indicators that parents can observe at home	6
Behavioural indicators	6
Emotional indicators	7
Family and/or social indicators	7
5. Common mistakes that do not help	8
6. How to communicate to reduce conflict and encourage change	9
7. Prevention tips for the home	11
8. Daily prevention in the family	12
9. When to seek help	13
10. Final message for families	14



1. Problematic Online Gaming (POG)

Nowadays, video games are part of the daily routine for many children and adolescents. For most, they are a form of leisure and a way to interact with friends, but for many families it is not always easy to tell when it is a healthy hobby and when it begins to take up too much of their children's lives.

This guide has been created to offer guidance on a reality that raises questions and, at times, concerns. Furthermore, educating children about screen use is not easy, and it is normal for conflicts or insecurities to arise. That is why here you will find clear information and practical guidelines to understand what Problematic Online Gaming (POG) is, what signs to look out for, and how to act firmly and empathetically if we begin to see behaviours at home that concern us.

It is not about using technical terms, but about having useful criteria to know what is happening and how to support our children appropriately in a situation that can be delicate.

2. Simple explanations about Problematic Online Gaming (POG)

Many parents believe that Problematic Online Gaming (POG) is solely related to the number of hours a teenager spends in front of a screen playing games. However, what really defines this problem is the progressive loss of control over gaming and the impact it begins to have on their daily lives: on their responsibilities, on their relationship with their parents, with their peers and on their emotional well-being.

Therefore, to know if we may be dealing with POG, it is important to look for three clear signs. It is not necessary for all of them to appear at the same time, nor for a single behaviour to lead us to believe that there is a problem. Concern arises when several of these behaviours are repeated continuously and begin to clearly affect their daily life.

Among the most common signs are a clear difficulty in stopping playing when appropriate, even after agreeing on schedules or limits, accompanied by anger, frustration, or conflict when asked to stop playing. It may also be observed that gaming is becoming a priority over other important activities such as studying, resting, sports, or socialising. Added to this is maintaining the same gaming patterns—or even increasing them—despite the emergence of family conflicts, poor school performance, or constant mood swings.

It is important to clarify, so as not to cause unnecessary alarm, that not all teenagers who play a lot have a problem. In fact, gaming can be a social, creative and even stimulating activity. The difference arises when gaming ceases to be just another leisure activity and becomes the main focus around which everything else revolves. This does not mean that all young people develop a disorder, but it does mean that we are talking about a reality that is present in many European households and that it is important to be aware of so that we can take action in time if warning signs begin to appear. This is precisely why it is useful to differentiate between different situations and levels of use.

In healthy gaming, teenagers enjoy playing, but maintain a balance with their other responsibilities, such as schoolwork or social life, and combine it with other activities such as sports or other hobbies. They fulfil their tasks, respect agreed limits and can stop the activity without causing significant conflict.

In risky use, we cannot yet talk about POG, but signs are beginning to appear that should not be ignored. Arguments about playing time, occasional failure to stick to schedules, resistance to leaving the game, or the occasional neglect of tasks and responsibilities are common. Irritability may also appear when they cannot play, in the form of intense anger, bad manners, or disproportionate behaviour. At this stage, gaming does not yet completely dominate their routine, but it begins to generate tension and imbalances that, if they continue over time, can increase.

We talk about Problematic Online Gaming when gaming ceases to be just another leisure activity and begins to condition the organisation of daily life. That is, when many decisions revolve around whether or not they can play, when gaming is prioritised over responsibilities and obligations, and when gaming becomes a regular source of conflict at home. In these cases, not only are schoolwork and rest affected, but also family life, peer relationships and the adolescent's emotional state. Constant arguments and heated exchanges may arise, where frustration, anger and rage become commonplace and may even manifest themselves in a more intense or disproportionate manner. In addition, they tend to isolate themselves from others in order to play without being disturbed and develop a loss of interest in other activities. Added to all this is the fact that, due to constant mood swings, coexistence becomes increasingly difficult and unpredictable.

Recognising these differences allows families to act calmly, without alarmism, but also without minimising signs that may increase over time.



3. Vulnerability of adolescents to online gambling

Adolescence is a time of profound change, not only physically—which is the most obvious—but also in the way they think, feel and relate to others. These years are very important because it is the time when personal identity is being formed and the need to belong to a group, feel valued and find one's own space increases. The opinion of peers takes on special importance and social recognition becomes a key element in self-esteem and how adolescents perceive themselves.

At the same time, although thinking becomes more complex, the ability to regulate impulses, manage frustration and anticipate consequences is still maturing. This does not mean that they do not understand what they are doing, but rather that they find it more difficult to curb behaviour when something is stimulating or rewarding. In this context, immediate rewards take on special importance, and online video games are designed to offer precisely this type of constant reinforcement: points, levels, achievements, quick rewards and immediate recognition.

In addition, the digital environment offers experiences that fit particularly well with this stage of life: a sense of competition, belonging to a group, the possibility of building one's own identity and, at times, a way to disconnect from academic stress, social conflicts or the insecurities typical of adolescence. For many teenagers, gaming is not just entertainment; it becomes a space that responds to the needs of their stage of development: feeling valid, accepted and recognised.

That said, European data reinforce the theories described above. In a study conducted in 30 countries with more than 89,000 adolescents, about one in five young people were at high risk of developing problematic behaviours related to video games. Exposure is higher in boys than in girls, although both can be affected. This data is not intended to alarm, but to provide context: we are talking about a reality that is part of the current environment in many homes.

For this reason, the role of the family is not simply to prohibit, but to accompany, setting consistent limits and offering alternatives. Evidence shows that clear rules and emotional support from the family act as protective factors. When there is dialogue, age-appropriate supervision and a climate of trust, the risk decreases significantly.



4. Indicators that parents can observe at home

It is important to note that an isolated sign does not necessarily indicate a problem. Concern arises when several of the behaviours described below persist over time and begin to clearly affect family life and well-being.

Behavioural indicators

At the behavioural level, problems may arise in stopping the game or match being played at the time, even after repeated warnings to stop playing or after agreeing on limits on playing time. There may also be a tendency to minimise actual usage time, postpone responsibilities or disrupt basic routines.

Examples that can be observed in the above description

- The game is repeatedly prolonged even though it is time for dinner or bedtime.
- Frequent arguments arise over schedules.
- The child goes to bed later and later because “there’s just one more game left”.
- They begin to neglect schoolwork or commitments.



Emotional indicators

Gaming may start to become the main way of managing emotions. It is used to relieve anger, frustration or boredom, and the reaction to interruption may be disproportionate, causing outbursts of anger, rage, hitting or even insults.

This can be observed, for example:

- Marked irritability when unable to play.
- Frequent mood swings for no apparent reason.
- Low tolerance for frustration in everyday situations.
- Difficulty disconnecting from the game even after it has ended.

Lack of sleep is also a relevant sign, especially when it persists over time and affects mood and school performance.

Family and/or social indicators

Less drastic but still significant changes may occur in the family and social sphere. The adolescent may begin to progressively isolate themselves or reject activities they previously enjoyed.

Some common situations may include:

- Preferring to stay at home playing games rather than attending family gatherings or social events.
- Reducing the time spent with friends outside the digital environment.
- Tense conversations or constant conflicts related to screens.
- More distant or defensive communication when the subject of gaming is brought up.



5. Common mistakes that do not help

When gaming becomes a concern, it is normal for many parents to react with fear, anger or a feeling that the situation is getting out of hand. However, some responses, although well-intentioned, can increase the conflict rather than resolve it.

Sometimes, out of concern, we choose to impose immediate bans: “No more games,” “No more gaming for the rest of the week.” When this measure is not accompanied by dialogue or a clear explanation, the teenager may experience it as an unfair or disproportionate punishment, which creates more tension at home and turns the issue of gaming into a constant battle.

It is also common to resort to threats that are not carried out: “If you keep this up, I’ll take it away forever,” “I’m going to break the console.” When the teenager sees that these consequences do not materialise, the limits lose consistency and the adult’s word loses credibility. Over time, this can weaken parental authority and make it difficult for future agreements to be respected.

On other occasions, the problem is minimised with phrases such as “it’s just a phase” or “all teenagers play”. Downplaying the issue may provide momentary peace of mind, but it can also delay necessary intervention when persistent signs are already appearing. Ignoring the first signs does not usually make them disappear; in some cases, it simply displaces them or makes them chronic.

Excessive control, constant surveillance, or checking mobile phones or tablets without prior agreement can also damage trust. When teenagers feel that they are only being supervised out of mistrust or punishment, communication often suffers, dialogue becomes difficult, and they tend to withdraw without wanting to talk or express how they are feeling. Therefore, the goal is not to exercise absolute control over what they do, but to accompany them so that they gradually develop self-control, emotional management skills and responsibility in their use of games, always within clear, consistent and pre-established limits.



6. How to communicate to reduce conflict and encourage change

When we talk about the use of games at home, it is not only the rules that are established that matter, but also the way in which they are communicated, since in many cases, conflict arises not so much from the limit itself, but from the tone, timing or manner in which it is presented. Therefore, before focusing solely on how long they can play or what consequences to apply, it is worth considering how we are approaching the issue and how we can approach our child so that they do not become defensive or feel that we are judging them.

Firstly, the timing of the conversation is key. Trying to talk while your teenager is playing or just after an argument usually makes it difficult for them to listen, because at that moment they are focused on the game or upset by the argument, and this reduces their ability to listen and reflect. However, when you find a quiet space, without any prior tension, the conversation is usually more productive and less defensive.

Furthermore, listening before correcting allows you to understand what role gaming plays in their life. Asking what they like, how they feel when they play, or why they find it difficult to stop does not mean justifying it, but trying to understand it. Empathy, in this sense, does not mean agreeing with everything, but recognising that behind the behaviour there may be emotional or social needs that they do not yet know how to express in any other way. Sometimes, behind excessive gaming there may be stress, insecurity, difficulties with peers or even discomfort that they do not know how to explain, so rather than focusing solely on screen time, it is important to try to understand what the real problem is that is manifesting itself through gaming.

Similarly, the way parents express their concerns also makes an important difference, as saying “you’re addicted” is not the same as saying “I’m worried to see you so tired lately” or “I’ve noticed that we’re arguing more and more about this issue and I’d like us to solve it together”. When the message is based on what one observes and feels, rather than directly pointing the finger at the other person, it reduces the feeling of attack and increases the possibility of dialogue.



In this context, it is essential to differentiate between the person and the behaviour, because the problem is not the son or daughter, but the use being made of the game. When we resort to labels or disparaging remarks, even if we do so out of concern, we can directly affect their self-esteem, which at this stage is particularly vulnerable and still in the process of being built. In fact, fragile self-esteem can become a factor that encourages them to seek refuge in gaming. On the other hand, when we specify the behaviour that concerns us – for example, not sticking to schedules or neglecting responsibilities – we make it easier for the teenager to take responsibility without feeling questioned as a person, since our goal is not to question who they are, but to understand what is happening and help them take responsibility for their behaviour.

On the other hand, boundaries are still necessary, but they work better when they are explained, agreed upon as far as possible, and maintained consistently. It is not a question of the adolescent deciding everything, but of them understanding the meaning of the rules and participating in their enforcement. We must therefore try to ensure that agreements are clear, schedules realistic and consequences agreed in advance in order to provide security and reduce excessive punishments and measures taken in moments of tension.

Therefore, the goal is not to control every move, but to accompany the teenager in the progressive development of their self-control, autonomy, and ability to manage emotions and frustrations. When there is dialogue, consistency, and a climate of trust, the use of games can be approached from an educational perspective rather than a confrontational one.



7. Prevention tips for the home

Setting limits at home does not mean imposing rigid rules or becoming an authoritarian figure, but rather offering our children a clear and consistent framework that helps them organise their time and understand their priorities. For these boundaries to be effective, it is essential that both parents maintain a common and consistent stance, avoiding situations where one takes on the role of the 'good cop' and the other the 'bad cop', as this imbalance often leads to confusion, confrontation and a loss of authority. When rules are well defined, realistic and clearly explained, teenagers can understand that they are not a punishment, but a way of protecting their well-being and promoting their development. For all this to work in practice, there are several aspects that are worth considering carefully.

One of the main aspects to consider is undoubtedly rest. Sleeping fewer hours in order to play a game longer may seem insignificant, but when it is repeated over time, it ends up affecting mood, concentration and school performance. Rest is essential during adolescence because the body and brain are still developing, and lack of sleep can lead to irritability, impulsiveness and lower tolerance for frustration. Therefore, paying attention to our children's hours of rest is not an exaggeration or a strict measure, but a way of looking after their health and emotional balance. Sleeping between seven and eight hours on a regular basis helps them to face their responsibilities the next day with greater serenity and clarity.

Another important aspect to consider is how our children's daily tasks and responsibilities are organised, because it is not just a question of getting them done, but of doing them with sufficient time, attention and dedication. When obligations become a quick formality so that they can play as soon as possible, the message they internalise is that the important thing is not to do them well, but to finish them quickly so that they are free and have more time to play.

For this reason, within the limits established at home, it is advisable to set aside a clear space for study and responsibilities, preventing them from always being displaced by online gaming. Similarly, it is important to convey that free time should not be spent solely on video games, as teenagers need to understand that there are other forms of leisure that can also be attractive and satisfying, such as sports, cultural activities or simply meeting up with friends and spending time with people their own age. Incorporating these alternatives into their daily routine not only broadens their experiences, but also allows them to discover new sources of enjoyment and well-being that do not depend on a screen.

Finally, we must not forget that limits only work when they are applied consistently and constantly. However, beyond specific rules, the example we set as parents has a decisive influence. Our children observe how we use screens, how we organise our time and how we prioritise our responsibilities. If we want to encourage balance and self-control in the digital environment, we also need to demonstrate that balance in our daily lives. In many cases, the model we convey at home teaches more than any written rule.



8. Daily prevention in the family

Prevention in the family environment cannot be understood solely as a set of isolated rules or recommendations, but rather as a way of relating to our children on a daily basis. The way we communicate with them, the tone we use and the attitude with which we approach conflicts have a direct impact on their emotional development. It is not a question of becoming “mates” or eliminating authority, but of exercising leadership that is close, firm and understanding at the same time, combining clear boundaries with the ability to listen.

During adolescence, children need to feel that they can express what is happening to them without fear of being judged, but they also need adult role models to guide them. Finding that balance is not always easy, but it is essential, because the emotional climate at home influences not only their use of games, but all areas of their lives: their self-esteem, how they relate to others and how they deal with difficulties. When there is dialogue, respect and consistency at home, teenagers have a safe space from which to grow.

Showing interest in their digital world is part of that ideal communication. Asking what games they play, who they play with, or what attracts them to them does not mean accepting any behaviour, but rather opening a channel of trust that facilitates further guidance. When children perceive that their parents are trying to understand before judging, they are more likely to share their concerns or difficulties.

Furthermore, offering leisure alternatives and encouraging shared moments without screens is not simply a strategy to “take away playtime,” but a way to broaden their experiences and strengthen real bonds. For example, going outdoors and sharing activities with friends in their environment or participating in family spaces allows them to discover other sources of satisfaction that do not depend on the digital environment.

In this process, our role as parents is fundamental because we are constant role models, even when we think they are not watching us. The way we manage our own emotions, how we use technology and how we resolve conflicts becomes a model that they internalise. Therefore, prevention is not just about monitoring screen time, but also about accompanying, guiding and building an environment that promotes balanced development.



9. When to seek help

At this point, it is important to say something clearly: asking for help is not a failure. As parents, we sometimes feel that we should be able to solve everything at home, but there are situations in which seeking external support is a sign of responsibility, not weakness. If the conflict around gaming has become constant, if you notice that your son or daughter is becoming increasingly isolated, or if you perceive emotional changes that concern you, you do not have to face it alone.

It is also time to seek guidance when you feel that conversations always end in arguments, that rules are not working, or that the situation is overwhelming you emotionally. Recognising that we need help is actually a way of protecting our children before the problem grows.

There are resources you can turn to: the school counsellor, psychological services, health centres, programmes specialising in addictive behaviours, or associations that work in prevention and family support. Asking for information, consulting, or simply resolving doubts can make a big difference.

Acting in time facilitates more effective interventions and prevents the problem from becoming chronic. Just as we turn to health professionals when faced with a physical problem, it is also legitimate to do so when it comes to emotional and behavioural well-being. Seeking help is caring.



10. Final message for families

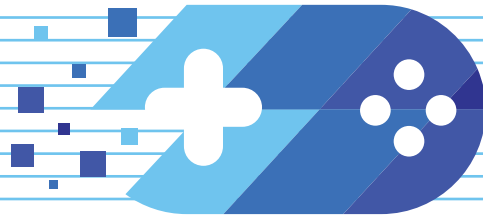
Supporting a son or daughter in their use of online gaming is not always easy, especially during adolescence, when they seek autonomy, experience intense changes and test boundaries. However, it is important to remember that most situations can be redirected when there is dialogue, consistency and adult presence.

The goal is not to eliminate video games from their lives or turn the home into a space of constant control, but to help them learn to use them in a balanced, responsible, and healthy way. Children need rules, but they also need to feel heard and understood.

As parents, we do not seek perfection, but rather to accompany them as best we can. There will be moments of disagreement and tension, but also opportunities to strengthen the bond and teach skills that will serve them well in many other areas of their lives.

Prevention begins at home, in the way we talk, in the boundaries we set and in the example we set. And, when necessary, asking for help is part of that care. We are not alone in this task, and accompanying our children with firmness and closeness is, in itself, a protective factor.





game
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