

Digital playgrounds

Children's views on video gaming

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Part of the statutory role of the Children's Commissioner is to consider the views and interests of children. Both are important parts of my role, but sometimes they can be in competition. Listening to children is a principle I hold incredibly tight, but I can see that listening uncritically to children's views on certain issues – like appropriate bedtimes! – may not be in their interests. Gaming is one of those areas where I fear children's views and interests may be in competition.

The findings that I publish today show that children generally support playing video games, and do not see them as a significant cause of harm to their health and wellbeing. Children did say they were more concerned about the impact of multi-player games, and girls were less positive about their impact than boys.

However, that does not mean that we should not ward against the very real harms that can go along with gaming for some children. As the qualitative re-analysis of data from *The Big Ask* survey shows, children have conflicting feelings about games – seeing them as a fun hobby that they value, but also expressing wariness about the addictive nature of games and other associated harms.

My work on children's experiences of growing up online has demonstrated to me how the online world is integral to children's lives but also how pervasive and traumatic online harms, such as unwitting

exposure to pornography, can be. With gaming specifically, I am reiterating my concerns about the clear harms associated with gambling on children in relation to paid loot boxes in video games.

Children have a right to play – and that extends to the digital playgrounds of video games. Gaming can be a very social activity through which children find community, and have a lot of fun! Children learn new skills and develop new forms of reasoning, and some of them will even go on to have careers in e-sports, streaming, or the tech sector more generally.

Whether it's in their local park or in a gaming lobby with their friends, children should be able to play in safety. I will continue to look into the issues of harms for children that come from gaming, and how these could be mitigated. In particular, I will ensure that children's concerns about multi-player games as a potential source of harm are reflected in the implementation of the Online Safety Act.

Executive Summary

This report contains new analysis of a nationally representative survey of children in England aged 8 to 17, conducted in March 2023, and new qualitative analysis of *The Big Ask* survey data from 2021.

Nationally representative survey

- Around two thirds of children viewed video games as beneficial to children's health and wellbeing.
- Children thought single-player games were better for children's mental health and wellbeing than multi-player games (67% versus 62%).
- Children were more concerned about the impact of multi-player games. Only 4% of children thought that single player games were bad for children's health and wellbeing, while 10% thought that multi-player games were.
- For all forms of gaming, boys were more likely than girls to think that gaming was good for children's health and wellbeing (70% versus 65% for single player games, 69% versus 56% for multiplayer games, 50% versus 39% for virtual reality games).
- Responses from children about online safety fell into key themes: the need to encourage offline activities, digital divide, and the positives of gaming.

The Big Ask

- Of all responses to *The Big Ask*, 1.4% included a video gaming-related keyword. The mean age of these children was 13 years old, and 55% were boys and 40% were girls.
- Key themes, which demonstrated a generally positive view of gaming, included: gaming as a fun activity, aspiration to become a professional gamer, frustration at adults not recognising the positives of gaming, and desire to improve at gaming.
- Key themes, which demonstrated a generally negative view of gaming, included: desire or social pressure to have better gaming equipment, concern over paid loot boxes in games, concern over

gaming addiction, gaming as a distraction from children's goals, gaming as a distraction from other positive activities, and virtual reality.

Next steps

- The findings in this paper will contribute to the Children's Commissioner's role in ensuring that children's voices are heard in the implementation of the Online Safety Act.
- The Children's Commissioner will consider further work on the harms associated with gaming, such as looking into the issues around gaming addictions and the particular impacts of multi-player video games.

Introduction

The Children's Commissioner's work on online safety has shown that the online world and digital activities are fundamental and integral parts of children's daily lives.¹ These digital childhoods present new and exciting opportunities for children to learn, connect, and play. However, many children do not feel safe online and speak about negative experiences online such as cyberbullying on social media, being contacted by strangers, stumbling across distressing content, or being influenced by negative attitudes.

This mix of new opportunities and potential harms is also present in video gaming, an activity large numbers of children engage in. Of children in the UK aged between 3 and 17, 89% had played video games in the last year and 77% of 7- to 18-year-olds have access to a games console.² The most common motivation (43%) for 3- to 17-year-olds to play video games was "to have fun". Gaming is not an inherently harmful behaviour, and should be seen in the context of children's right to play under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

For many children, gaming is a fun, challenging, and often social activity that they engage in safely. However, some aspects of gaming pose specific risks to children, including:

- **User-to-user services:** Some mobile and online games contain user-to-user services, such as text, voice and image sharing functions. Due to similar potential for harm as from social media platforms, these services fall within the scope of the new Online Safety Act and will be regulated by Ofcom. Providers of these services have a new duty of care to children using their platforms, which Ofcom is currently consulting on. Key safeguards to meet this duty will include age verification and age assurance technologies, active content moderation, and complaints and reporting systems.
- **Paid loot boxes and in-app purchases:** Some games include loot boxes that allow players to spend real money to unlock unknown virtual rewards. The Children's Commissioner has opposed the Government's decision to not legislate to bring paid loot boxes in line with other gambling harms for children and to rely on industry self-regulation.³

- **Gaming addiction:** The World Health Organisation recognises gaming disorder as a behavioural pattern characterised by impaired control and priority of gaming over other activities despite negative personal, family, social, educational, and occupational consequences.⁴ In 2019, NHS England established the Centre for Internet and Gaming Disorders, which has treated 745 people to March of this year. The average age of those treated was 17 years old.⁵

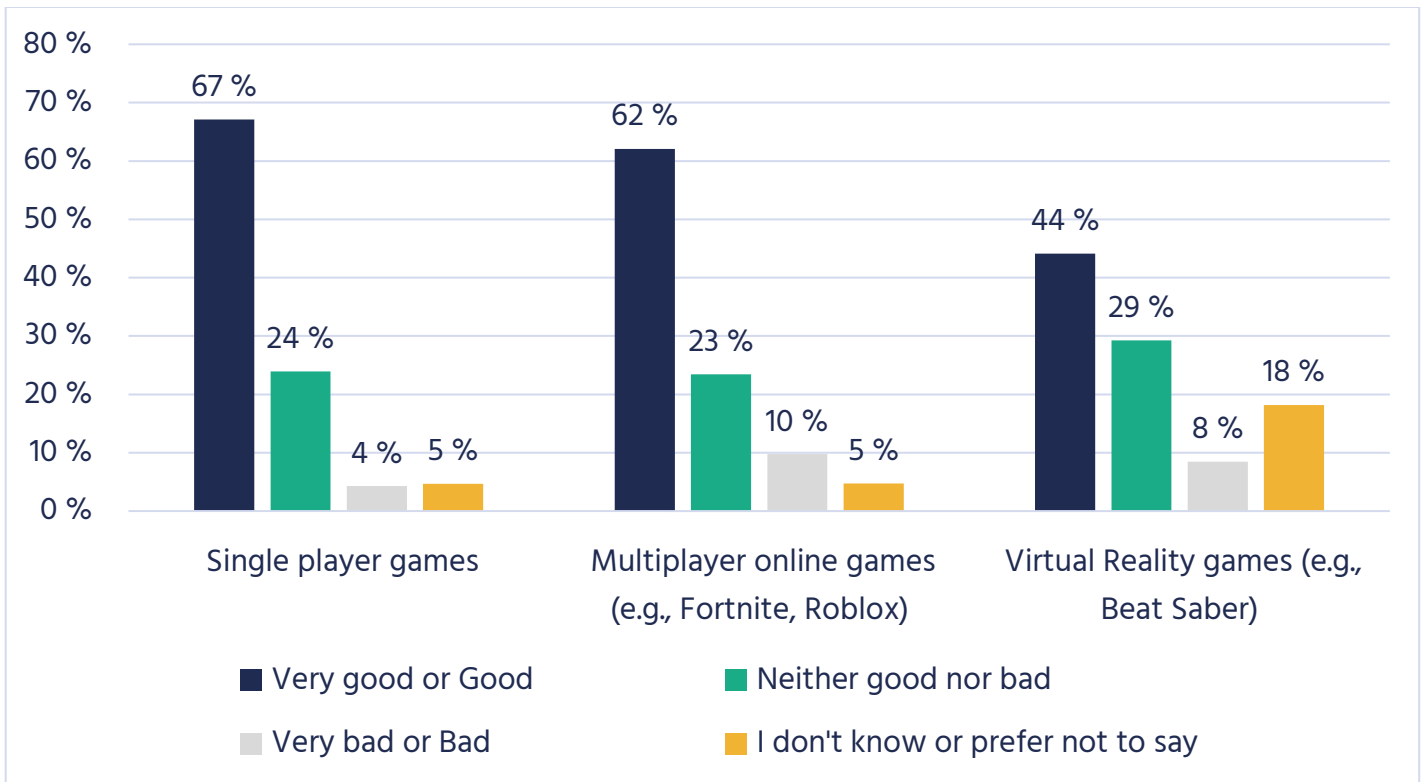
This paper also includes some specific findings about children's views on virtual reality (VR). While the adoption of these technologies remains relatively low, it is important not to be complacent about the risks to children in these digital spaces.

Findings from the nationally representative survey

Gaming

Around two thirds of children viewed video games as beneficial to children’s health and wellbeing (Figure 1). A slightly higher proportion of children thought single-player games were good for children’s mental health and wellbeing than multi-player games (67% versus 62%) but less than half the percentage of children thought single player games were bad for children’s health (4%) compared to multi-player games (10%).

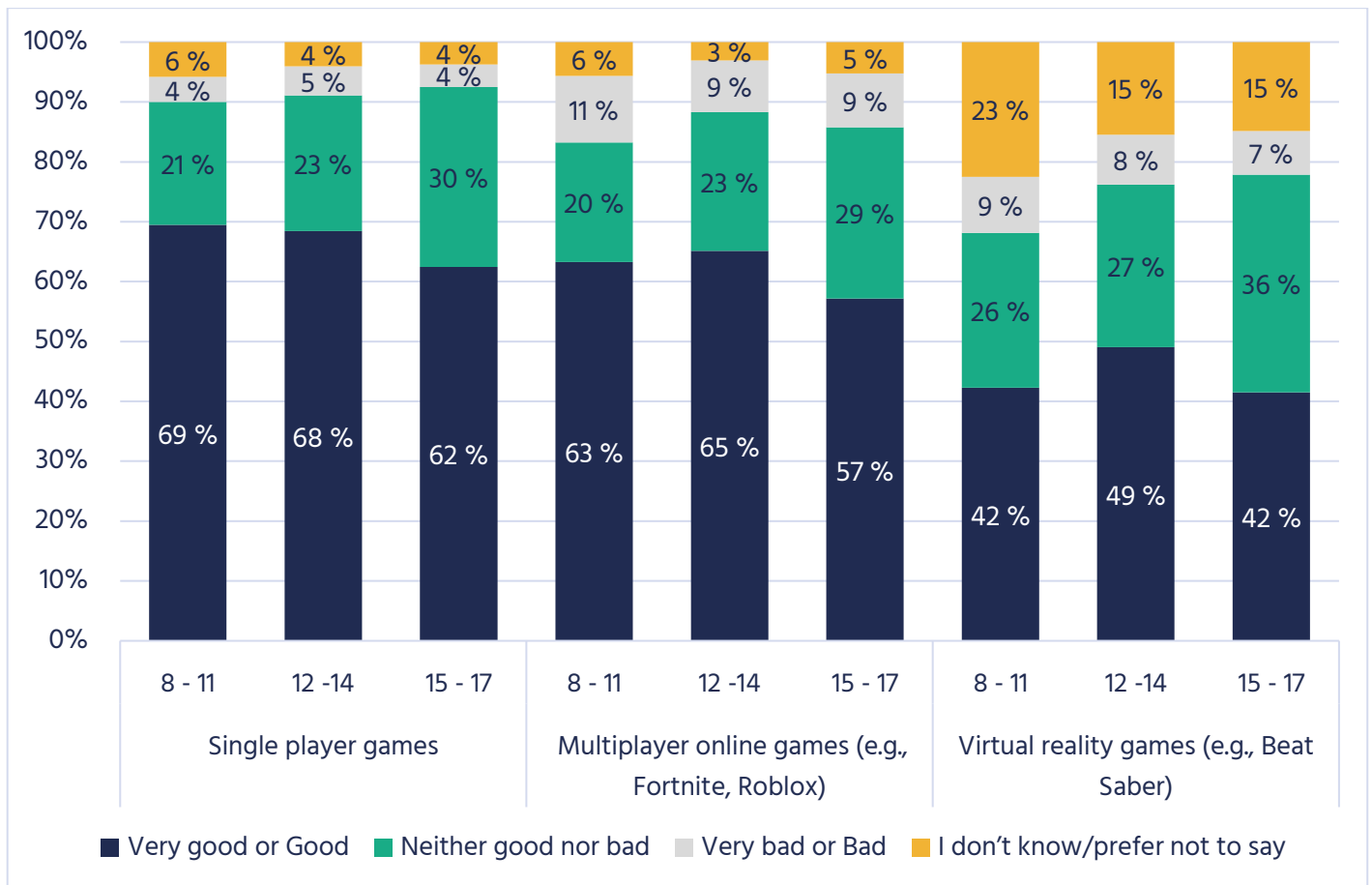
Figure 1. Children’s views on whether gaming, including VR gaming, is good or bad for children’s health and wellbeing



Interestingly, by age group, teenagers aged between 15 and 17 years old were least likely to think single player and online multiplayer games were good for children’s health and wellbeing, compared to the 8-11- and 12–14-year-old age groups (Figure 2). For both gaming types, uncertainty increases with age, as

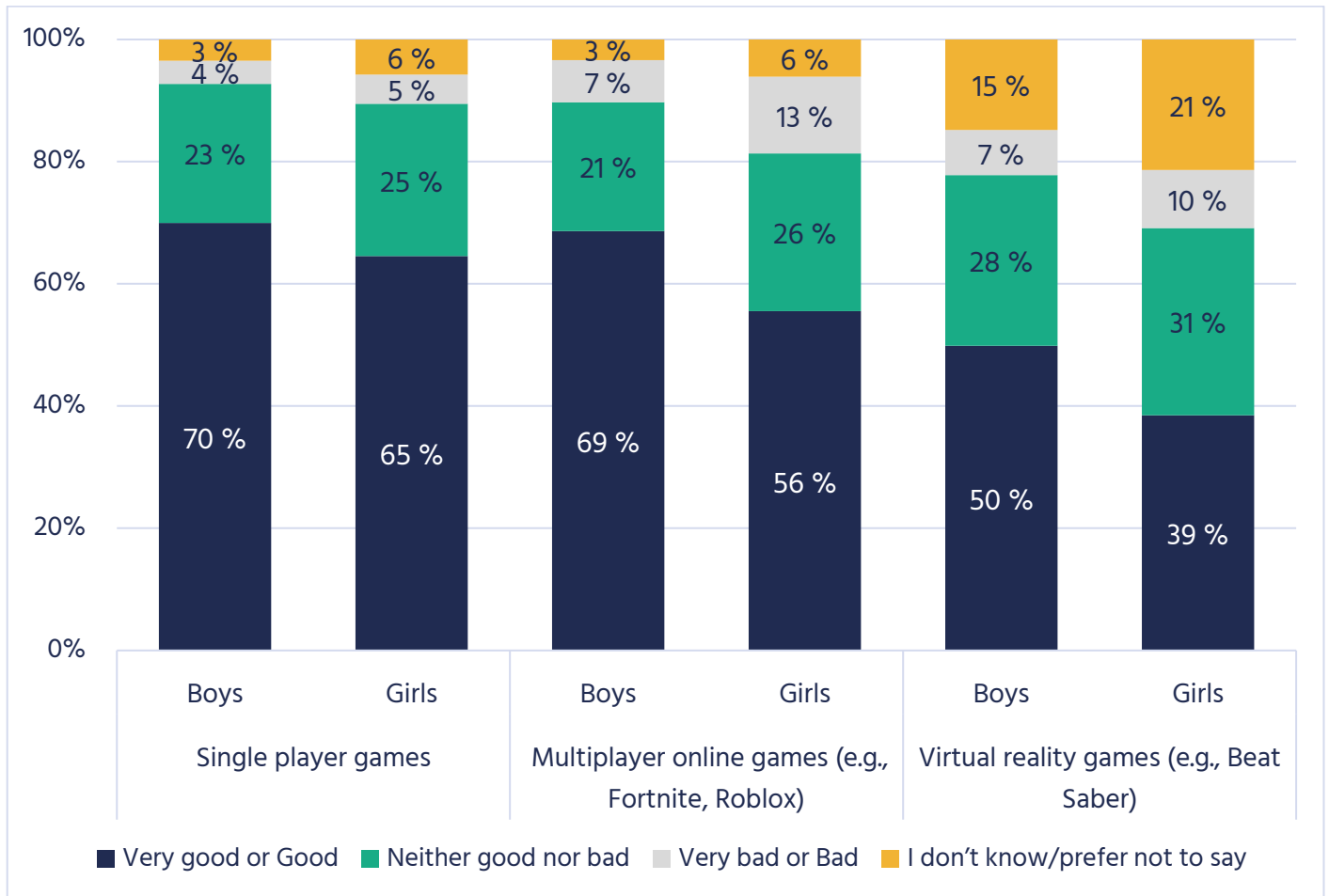
an increasing proportion of children think single and multiplayer games are neither good nor bad for children’s health and wellbeing with each increasing age group (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Children’s views on gaming’s effect on children’s health and wellbeing by age group



For all forms of gaming, a higher proportion of boys than girls thought that gaming was good for children’s health and wellbeing (Figure 3). However, girls and boys were similarly likely to think single player games were bad for children’s health (4% and 5% respectively). Girls and boys were more polarised with regard to online multiplayer games, in which girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to think these games were bad for children’s health and wellbeing (13% versus 7%).

Figure 3. Children’s views on gaming’s effect on children’s health and wellbeing by gender



Children, both with and without special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) as reported by their parent, were unlikely to think any form of gaming was bad for children’s mental and physical health (10% or less of responses). Of the three forms of gaming, children were most likely to think single player games were good for children’s health (67% of children without SEND, 68% of children with SEND) and were least likely to think virtual reality games were good for children’s health (43% of children without SEND, 47% of children with SEND).

What children and parents said about gaming

Both children and parents were asked the open-text question, ‘What do you think the government should do to make children’s lives better?’

Just under two percent of children (1.7% or 25 children) mentioned a keyword relating to online safety in their response to this question. The mean age of children who mentioned gaming was 10 years old, and nearly two thirds of the responses were from boys (64% boys, 36% girls).

A slightly lower proportion of parents mentioned gaming (1% or 19 parents). They responded on behalf of a nearly even distribution of boys and girls (53% boys, 47% girls). The mean age of these parents' children was 13 years old.

The responses from children fell into three broad themes:

- **Need to encourage offline activities:** For example, one 13-year-old girl said, *"More social [activities] away from internet."*
- **Digital divide:** A 15-year-old girl spoke about the digital divide and access to devices, *"Free laptops and other tech."* While a ten-year-old girl highlighted the need for better equipment in school: *"Provide us with more educational facilities such as laptops or iPads."*
- **Positives of gaming:** For example, a nine-year-old boy spoke about the benefits of online activities: *"More sports events and computer game competitions."*

Virtual reality

The survey asked children aged 8 to 17 years old whether they had ever used a virtual reality headset, who owned the headset they had used and whether they thought virtual reality gaming was good or bad for children's health and wellbeing.

Nearly half (46%) of children said that they had ever used a virtual reality headset, 44% of whom owned their own device. The next most common way of using a virtual reality headset was using a friend's (22%) and 13% of children who had used a virtual reality headset had borrowed their sibling's. Only 4% of all children had used a virtual reality headset at school. Overall, boys were more likely than girls to have used a virtual reality headset (54% versus 38%).

Only 44% of children thought virtual reality gaming (e.g., Beat Saber) was good for children's health and wellbeing, while 29% thought it was neither good nor bad and only 8% thought it was bad. Nearly a

fifth (18%) of children didn't know or preferred not to say. Therefore, comparably fewer children thought virtual reality gaming was good for children's health and wellbeing than both single player and multiplayer games. However, a similar proportion of children thought that all forms of gaming were bad for children's health and wellbeing (between 4% and 10%).

Children were also asked whether they had ever used a virtual reality headset and who owned the headset(s) they had used. Overall, children with SEND were more likely to report having ever used a virtual reality headset (55% of children with SEND) compared to children without SEND (44%). Of the children with SEND who had ever used a virtual reality headset, 39% had used their own headset, 23% had used a friend's headset, and 16% had used a sibling's headset.

Findings from *The Big Ask*

To complement these qualitative responses, relevant free text responses from *The Big Ask*, the largest survey of children in England that the Children's Commissioner conducted in 2021, have also been included.⁶ These responses were identified using keyword searches (see Methodology).

Of over 260,000 open-text responses to *The Big Ask*, 3,530 quotes (1.4%) matched keywords relating to gaming. The mean age of children who wrote these comments was 13 years old, 55% were from boys, 40% from girls, 3% from children who identified with another gender and 2% didn't want to say.

Figure 4. Word cloud of responses to *The Big Ask* mentioning keywords relating to gaming



Unlike the nationally representative survey above, children spoke about video games in *The Big Ask* in a mostly negative light. This may be partly due to the framing of the question which focussed on the barriers preventing young people from achieving their ambitions: the questionnaire for 9- to 12-year-olds asked, "What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?".

Key themes

The over 3,500 responses to *The Big Ask* that mentioned a keyword relating to gaming fell into one of the following key themes.

Generally positive key themes were:

- Gaming as a fun activity;
- Aspiration to become a professional gamer;
- Frustration at adults not recognising the positives of gaming; and
- Desire to improve at gaming.

Generally negative key themes of gaming were:

- Desire or social pressure to have better gaming equipment;
- Concern over paid loot boxes in games;
- Concern over gaming addiction;
- Gaming as a distraction from children's goals;
- Gaming as a distraction from other positive activities; and
- Virtual reality.

Generally positive key themes

Gaming as a fun activity

Many children spoke about enjoying gaming and wanting to do more of it.

"We all want to have fun and have a lot of free time to have and also have video games." – Boy, 13, *The Big Ask*.

“Being able to play more computer games and having more fun.” – Boy, 8, The Big Ask.

“Being rich! So I can buy anything I want plus more cameras and games for fun and YouTube.” – Girl, 8, The Big Ask.

“Gaming even though it’s fun for me” – Boy, 8, The Big Ask.

Aspiration to become a professional gamer

One of the most common responses was children expressing an aspirational desire to be a professional gamer or streamer as an adult. This was particularly common among boys under 10 years old, often occurring with other ‘dream jobs’ such as YouTuber or footballer.

“For [example] if you want to be a YouTube pro gamer and your parents say you are only allowed one hour a day (weekend only) you wouldn’t be able to achieve that [...]” – Boy, 9, The Big Ask.

“I would be a gamer YouTuber and be famous and good.” – Boy, 8, The Big Ask.

However, some children were sceptical about the career path of gamer:

“Adults have (some) a fixed idea what their child should be when their older. Some children don’t get choices. Most children probably don’t know what they want to be when their older so they can’t focus on the topics to get the job they want, or the fact they most likely won’t be able to be a ninja, superhero, actor or gamer.” – Girl, 12, The Big Ask.

“Video games are a big factor contributing to unfulfillment as from a young age children can become addicted and deluded into believing they can become famous gamers which in result will lead to them wasting valuable time to learn, read and exercise.” – Boy, 13, The Big Ask.

As well as playing them, many children spoke about wanting to make video games when they were older.

“A [chef], a game maker, a YouTuber, a toy maker, make new [devices], help my dad when I am older.” – Boy, 12, The Big Ask.

“A Nintendo worker.” – Boy, 7, The Big Ask.

Frustration at adults not recognising the positives of gaming

Children spoke about concern that their parents and other adults were not able to see gaming as a hobby like any other.

“Adults restricting hobbies and interests because they think others are more important (e.g. video games, drawing).” – Girl, 14, The Big Ask.

“Parents. When you are apparently [too] young to go and play out with your friends on your own or not be able to play games with chat functions such as Among Us. I felt left out when everyone is playing and talking about games I’m not [allowed].” – Girl, 11, The Big Ask.

Some children spoke about the need to harness the power of games for educational purposes.

“Personally, I think that making learning more fun (e.g. online learning games) could have a major difference in achieving as it would be seen as something fun rather than a task that has to be done by a specific date. Also, it would ensure that young people would revise more often and it could be remembered more easily rather than reading off a textbook - this would allow young people in England to achieve higher when they grow up.” – Girl, 15, The Big Ask.

“Games, because they are not very educational but you could play half an hour or so. Some games can be educational like [Time Tables Rock Stars] or Mathsframe. Games do help a little in kid’s life for them to have fun.” – Girl, 9, The Big Ask.

Desire to improve at gaming

Many children saw gaming as a skill that they wanted to improve in. These responses are similar in tone to children’s responses about sport and other hobbies.

“Being a better football player and a better gamer.” – Boy, 7, The Big Ask.

“Have fun and get good at games and friendships.” – Boy, 8, The Big Ask.

“Be good at Fortnite and be good at math.” – Boy, 7, The Big Ask.

“Be a good gamer and make a lot of money and be happy with my family.” – Boy, The Big Ask.

Generally negative key themes

Desire for and social pressure to have better gaming equipment

For example, as one 11-year-old boy said, *“For me it’s that I love gaming but I don’t have an Xbox like my friends so I [can’t] join them so I get left out and I suffer mental health in bed. Plus I wish robux (in game currency on Roblox) was free so I could have more fun and so can other people. (:”*

“Being rich and have good video games.” – Boy, 7, The Big Ask.

“Having a better education and having loads of robux and becoming a gamer my own. Also I want to help my mum and dad.” – Girl, The Big Ask.

“My mom to get me 1,000,000 robux and a new phone what works.” – Boy, 7, The Big Ask.

Concern over paid loot boxes in games

Responses referring to loot boxes were not common, yet some children connected them with gambling harms explicitly.

“I think personally the biggest thing that keeps them from achieving their dreams is lack from gambling protection from loot boxes.” – Boy, 12, The Big Ask.

“Motivation. companies target children to consume and consume and consume. without buying the latest phone, shoes, games and games DLC (which [encourages] gambling later on) and many more products we are left to see what to buy to make us happy [...] This cycle of having to get the next thing will not teach you anything personally and personal development is key to motivate yourself to get up in the morning and to get 5 hours of revision done.” – Boy, 15, The Big Ask.

Concern over gaming addiction

ⁱ Downloadable content (DLC) refers to additional, purchasable game content, such as story expansions or new features that enhance the competitiveness or aesthetics of video games.

One of the most common themes was concern that video games – as well as social media and digital devices more generally – were addictive and harmful.

“Being [addicted] to gaming.” – Boy, 12, The Big Ask.

“Computer games as they might become very addictive. Therefore, it could have a big impact on their education and health as it would stop them from trying out new things in nature/outdoors.” – Girl, 11, The Big Ask.

“Not tacking part, not doing homework and playing lots of games because you can get addicted to games.” – Girl, 12, The Big Ask.

“Video games are a big factor contributing to unfulfillment as from a young age children can become addicted and deluded into believing they can become famous gamers which in result will lead to them wasting valuable time to learn, read and exercise.” – Boy, 13, The Big Ask.

They get addicted to games and other stuff that distracts them from their education leading them to poor grades. For me it’s that my family pressures me to do well and with the stress I feel like I don’t [do] as well as a could.” – Girl, 13, The Big Ask.

“They play a lot of video games and they get like addicted to it and they stay up all night so they don’t get any sleep at all and [they’re] not ready for the next day.” – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.

“I think electronics stop children from having a happy and fun childhood as they get addicted it also ruins the time they have with their family a phone/tablet/iPad is like [alcohol] for children its addicting and bad for the children’s mental health[...].” – Girl, 9, The Big Ask.

“Games [because] they are sometimes addictive and it affects the gamers mood such as raging furious and they spend all day on it but they never go out and take some fresh air or [never] spend time with their [friend] or relatives.” – Boy, 9, The Big Ask.

“Get to play Fortnite for 24 hours [everyday]. Get 300,0000 pounds for my [salary] everyday. Get 100000 per year from my job. Have a nice drone, a good family and a great house.” – Boy, 8, The Big Ask.

Gaming as a distraction from children’s goals

Children talked about gaming, and their electronic devices, as distractions from things that they saw as more important, such as school work, life goals, and other hobbies.

"Well I want to be an author, but the thing holding me back is that I like playing games and usually I can't finish a book - mainly because I get tired of writing really quickly." – Girl, 11, *The Big Ask*.

"I think what stops children from [achieving] things at a young age, which will help with older life, is [technology]. I've experienced this myself as my sister has hopes to be a scientist when she grows up but she is addicted to her laptop, phone and ps4." – Girl, 11, *The Big Ask*.

"When they go on [their] devices because it becomes a [distraction] when it is nice outside and you can play fun sports and games." – Boy, 9, *The Big Ask*.

"I think that the events that stop children from achieving what they want are: addiction to online and offline games, they are not confident as they should be in learning, not doing much extra work to help boost their future career and the lack of currency to achieve what they would like." – Girl, 10, *The Big Ask*.

A common response was for children to associate gaming with laziness. One 13-year-old boy said, *"Truthfully, laziness and the temptation to lie down, eat junk and video games."*

Gaming as a distraction from other positive activities

Children commonly expressed concern that gaming, while fun, was distracting them from taking place in other positive activities that would benefit them more.

"Video games, children should play outside more. Social media invites peer pressure and cyber bullying. Age restrictions such as training also stops children from learning new skills." – Boy, 15, *The Big Ask*.

"Young people spend too much time on social media, TikTok and video games. They are not active or social (face to face) and there's nowhere for young people to go to enjoy themselves and have fun in my area." – Girl, 10, *The Big Ask*.

"What they used to wish for, a good education they can't get that now because they are [too] busy on their Xbox, phones, PlayStation, or Nintendo switch trying to level up to beat their friends in a silly game"

[instead] of physical [exercise] and having real friends in [the] real world not some random people from Canada. People need to practise their spelling or maths work from school instead of being [rude] and making silly joke about people's lives that they don't know about [...]" – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.

"Unhealthy relationships, nothing fun to do other than [on] your phone." – Child, 13, The Big Ask.

"[I] play computer games for a long time but it kind of destroys the education of children that they build up for the future and in the future you need a good job and you can get a good job with great education [...]" – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.

"Some video games, bad people, drug dealers, some social media, thieves, no fun as children, no prizes." – Boy, 12, The Big Ask.

Virtual reality

Virtual reality was not a major theme in children's responses. This may be partly to do with the limited adoption of the technology, particularly in 2021 when *The Big Ask* was conducted. Of children aged 3 to 17, only 7% played games in virtual reality in 2023 and 5% had in 2022.⁷

Where children spoke about virtual reality gaming specifically, it was out of a desire for access to better devices or more games. One boy said that he wanted *"to have more of my VR games."* An 8-year-old boy was more specific, *"I would like an Oculus Quest 2 VR headset 256gb [...]"*

Where children spoke about virtual reality more generally, it was as a negative concept.

"They stay in virtual reality and they don't do real world stuff." – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.

"Them being silly at school and not concentrating enough to get good grades. Also, computer games make people lazy and it destroys their brains so they cannot function outside of virtual reality." – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.

"Not being able to concentrate as easily as other children and being unhappy about what is going on in life to make them daydream about that very good/bad moment that happened to them. Video games because they only care about a virtual life inside of a game because many people I know play silly virtual

games instead of practicing work or understanding what you don't know how to do something and playing games instead of doing homework.” – Girl, 9, The Big Ask.

Methodology

This report combines analysis of two surveys: a nationally representative survey of children (aged 8 to 17 and their parents in England which ran in March 2023, and *The Big Ask*, a large-scale open survey of children in England aged 6 to 17 which ran in April-May 2021.

Data analysis of both surveys was conducted by the Children's Commissioner's office in November 2023. All analysis was completed in R.

Nationally representative survey

Findings in this report are based on analysis of a nationally representative survey of children and their parents conducted in March 2023 by an independent panel survey provider, Opinium. The survey used a custom accessible theme and was designed to take respondents less than 15 minutes to complete. The survey was in two parts; the first section was completed by a parent or carer, the parent then handed the survey over to their child aged between 8 and 17 years old, though some questions were only shown to older children. We asked parents to pick one child if they had more than one. The survey findings have been weighted to be nationally representative by the child's age and gender, and the geographic region of the household (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of sample demographics for the nationally representative survey

Demographic variable	Unweighted count	Weighted count	Weighted percent of sample
<i>Child age group</i>			
8 to 11	1,507	1,471	41%
12 to 14	1,097	1,084	29%
15 to 17	990	1,038	28%
<i>Child gender</i>			
Female	1,789	1,789	50%
Male	1,789	1,789	50%
<i>Parent age group</i>			
18 to 30	182	182	5%
31 to 40	1410	1410	39%

41 to 50	1493	1493	42%
51 to 60	460	460	13%
61 and over	47	47	1%
Parent gender			
Female	2,422	2,422	67%
Male	1,168	1,168	32%
Other or prefer not to say	<5	<5	<1%
Total sample	3,593	3,593	100%

Children aged between 8 and 17 were asked *'To what extent, if at all, do you think the following things are good or bad for children's health and wellbeing?'*, in reference to several forms of video gaming, including virtual reality gaming.

Children and parents were also asked an open-text question: *'What do you think the government should do to make children's lives better? I think...'*. Relevant free text responses about gaming were included. These responses were identified using keyword searches.ⁱⁱ All quotes within this report are from this nationally representative survey, unless stated otherwise.

***The Big Ask* survey qualitative responses**

To complement these qualitative responses, relevant free-text responses from *The Big Ask* have also been included.⁸ This analysis has not previously been published.

The Big Ask ran for approximately six weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge. *The Big Ask* was launched online on the Children's Commissioner's office website and social media channels in April 2021. The Children's Commissioner's office sent the survey link to every school and local authority in England, as well as to mental health hospitals, youth custody settings, children's homes, and many other settings, charities and community groups.

ⁱⁱ The following key words were used: animal crossing, beat saber, call of duty, cod, computer, console, device, fifa, fortnite, forza, game, gaming, laptop, loot, mario kart, meta, minecraft, multiplayer, mobile, nintendo, oculus, phone, playstation, player, pokemon, ps4, ps5, pubg, rig, roblox, singleplayer, steam, super mario, valve, vr, virtual reality, xbox, zelda

There were three versions of the survey for children and young people aged 6 to 17. The 6 to 8 and 9+ *The Big Ask* surveys included one free-text question each. To ensure the survey was age appropriate, the questions asked to the 6 to 8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to have the same meaning.

- The 6 to 8 survey asked: *'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?'*
- The 9 to 12 and 13 to 17 surveys asked: *'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?'*

References

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