



**EXPERT VIEW**

Vicki Shotbolt



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[www.theparentzone.co.uk](http://www.theparentzone.co.uk)

**T**aking three 13-year-old boys away for a half term holiday is a real eye opener. Aside from discovering that no matter how many times you fill the fridge up with food they will still be hungry, you realise that only doing activities aimed at specific age groups can be tricky.

The adventure treasure hunt that was meant to be an activity 'suitable for all ages' turned out to be a serious bore for anyone over the age of five (I knew as soon as I saw the woodland animal cartoons on the treasure hunt map that it wasn't going to keep my boys happy!), whilst the paintballing should really have said 'age 13 and up... but not really great for a woman over 40 who doesn't like mud'.

Age ratings for games, videos and apps present an even greater challenge for parents. How often do we take the time to watch or play them before we let our kids have a go? And how often do we stick together as parents to make sure that if we say no to an over-18 game, they won't be able to head over to their friend's house to play it there?

The reality is that every parent takes a different approach to making decisions about whether they are going to allow their kids to watch or play things that the age rating says they shouldn't.

As one of my son's friends explained to me, "My parents are super strict. When they found out I had a Facebook account before I was 13, they made me shut it down. I had to go underground."

**Getting the balance right**

As parents, we all grapple with getting the balance right between allowing our children the freedom to explore new and exciting things in a safe and controlled environment (let's face it, we'd rather know what our kids are doing than discover they are doing it anyway and not telling us) and exposing them to things that are just not appropriate for their age.

We overlook age ratings on things like films, games and apps at our peril. It's a cliché, but those age ratings are there for a reason as I found out recently when I sat down to watch a film with my son. The seemingly innocuous '15' age rating actually meant a constant stream of bad language and 'scenes of a sexual nature' that were definitely not scenes I wanted to watch with him – or him with me.

I have to admit that I don't play games with him on his Xbox very often – mainly because he thinks I'm too rubbish at them to be worth playing with – but I have taken a look at some of the '18' rated games and it is an eye-watering experience. The shooting, blood and gore are just the beginning. In some of the most popular war games, players are invited to

make major decisions – shoot the civilians to save the kidnap victim or leave them to die and get to the next level?

Designed for adults but oh-so-attractive to children, these games encourage youngsters to explore things we would never dream of asking them to tackle in real life before they were ready or, possibly, ever. And yet, standing in the shop, faced with a child who is desperate for the latest game that is being heavily advertised and that all their friends are talking about – and quite possibly playing – how many of us have given in and thought 'what harm can it do'?

When it comes to websites, it can be even trickier as they aren't age-rated in the same way as other media. Some sites, like Facebook and YouTube, have minimum age limits but many under-13s find their way around them.

**"How many of us have given in and thought 'what harm can it do'?"**

In the vast majority of cases, young people cope remarkably well with everything they do and see online. But does that make it a good idea to let children see and do things that are intended for a much older audience? Do we want our kids to be listening to bad language, seeing sex scenes and playing violent games at a young age?

**Familiarising ourselves with age ratings**

Last year, the Government asked Reg Bailey, CEO of the Mothers' Union, to investigate the sexualisation and commercialisation of young people and he recommended that more should be done to protect them from the 'wallpaper of sexualisation' that was surrounding them.

The advice we give to parents is to think really hard before you give in and let your children buy or use technology that isn't the right age for them. Furthermore, it's useful to familiarise yourselves with age ratings on games and age limits on websites like Facebook and YouTube and to explain to your children why they exist.

From the 9pm TV watershed to the PEGI age ratings on games to passwords/PIN numbers on mobile phones and services like BBC iPlayer, companies are developing tools all the time to help parents set restrictions so that children don't accidentally (or deliberately) access content that isn't suitable for them. Websites might not have age ratings as standard but it is possible, using tools like Google SafeSearch, to help prevent adult content, such as pornography, from being only a click away.

Most parents will have allowed their children to do, see and play things that according to the age

# “We overlook age ratings at our peril.”

Vicki Shotbolt, CEO and Founder of The Parent Zone and mother of a 14-year-old, highlights the importance of getting young people to stick to age ratings.

rating they shouldn't have done. I certainly have. It's partly because most of us remember sneaking into the cinema to watch a film that we weren't supposed to watch. The best films – or at least the ones I wanted to see when I was 15 – were always rated 18 and my local cinema didn't check too closely to make sure I was the age I said I was.

Creeping in wasn't always without consequences though. I might have been able to get past the guy on the ticket desk to watch *The Exorcist* and I might have avoided any obvious punishment... but I still can't hear the music from that film without feeling slightly nauseous.

In today's digital world, with content that is more graphic and more easily available than ever before, we have to start taking notice of age ratings. I'm going to. ■



**Turn to page 76 for a series of articles about the impact of sexual images in the media on young people and page 86 for guidance about how to report any online concerns you might have.**

## The lowdown: PEGI labels

PEGI labels appear on the front and back of computer and video game packaging, indicating one of the following age levels: 3, 7, 12, 16 and 18. They provide a reliable indication of the suitability of the game content in terms of the protection of minors. The age rating does not take into account the difficulty level or skills required to play a game.



### PEGI 3

The content of games given this rating is considered suitable for all age groups. Some violence in a comical context (typically Bugs Bunny or Tom & Jerry cartoon-like forms of violence) is acceptable. The child should not be able to associate the character on the screen with real life characters, they should be totally fantasy. The game should not contain any sounds or pictures that are likely to scare or frighten young children. No bad language should be heard.



### PEGI 7

Any game that would normally be rated at 3 but contains some possibly frightening scenes or sounds may be considered suitable in this category.



### PEGI 12

Video games that show violence of a slightly more graphic nature towards fantasy character and/or non-graphic violence towards human-looking characters or recognisable animals, as well as video games that show nudity of a slightly more graphic nature would fall in this age category. Any bad language in this category must be mild and fall short of sexual expletives.



### PEGI 16

This rating is applied once the depiction of violence (or sexual activity) reaches a stage that looks the same as would be expected in real life. More extreme bad language, the concept of the use of tobacco and drugs and the depiction of criminal activities can be content of games that are rated 16.



### PEGI 18

The adult classification is applied when the level of violence reaches a stage where it becomes a depiction of gross violence and/or includes elements of specific types of violence. Gross violence is the most difficult to define since it can be very subjective in many cases, but in general terms it can be classed as the depictions of violence that would make the viewer feel a sense of revulsion.

### Descriptors

Descriptors shown on the back of the packaging indicate the main reasons why a game has received a particular age rating. There are eight such descriptors: violence, bad language, fear, drugs, sexual, discrimination, gambling and online gameplay with other people.



#### Bad language

Game contains bad language



#### Discrimination

Game contains depictions of, or material which may encourage discrimination



#### Drugs

Game refers to or depicts the use of drugs



#### Fear

Game may be frightening or scary for young children



#### Gambling

Games that encourage or teach gambling



#### Sex

Game depicts nudity and/or sexual behaviour or sexual references



#### Violence

Game contains depictions of violence



#### Online gameplay

Game can be played online