

# Top safety tips for parents to keep their children safe when using online games

The Office of Fair Trading has published new guidance (30<sup>th</sup> January) for parents that will help make sure that children are not pressured into making in-game purchases and reduce the risk of their making unauthorised payments.

Nearly 90 per cent of children aged between seven and 15 have played online games in the past six months, with half paying to play at least once.

Specifically, the OFT advice suggests that parents:

## Check your settings

Before handing over your device to your child, double-check the payment option settings. If you enter your password to authorise a single payment, you could be opening a payment 'window' in which your password won't be needed for any further payments. One option to stop anyone else making purchases on your device without your informed consent is to change that setting to require your password for every purchase. And make sure you don't share your password with anyone in case they inadvertently make a purchase.

## Read the game description

Before you download a game for your child or allow them to create an account, read all the information to check you're happy for your child to play the game. The description of the game in an app store or on the game's own website, should tell you important information about the game, such as: whether it's possible to make purchases in the game what the main characteristics are of the game.

## Check whether the game contains a social element

Many games allow players to connect with each other, either through the game or via social media platforms. If a game provides that facility, it should be clear to you from its up-front description. Considering the age of your child, think about whether you want them to be contactable by people who they might not know and whether there are any restrictions or safety features in the game that should stop that from happening.

## Play the game yourself

The best way for you to understand what your child will see when playing the game is for you to have a go first. That way, you can check whether you think the game's content will be suitable for your child, and make sure there is nothing that will mislead or place undue pressure on them to make a purchase. Ask your child about the games they play and whether there is anything in them that they're unhappy about. Be aware that game content

could change via updates that you might not have seen, so check regularly that you are still happy the game is suitable for your child.

## **Check your bills**

If you discover money has been taken from your account without your knowledge or consent, get in touch with the relevant platform operator or game provider first. That will give them the opportunity to investigate what happened and put right any problem attributable to them. If you're not satisfied by their answer, contact the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline for further information and advice.

## **Online games industry given two months to get house in order following OFT investigation**

**(Office of Fair trading Press releases 30 January 2014)**

<http://www.offt.gov.uk/news-and-updates/press/2014/05-14>

The OFT has published its final principles for online and in-app games, and given games producers a deadline of 1 April to ensure that their games do not breach consumer protection law.

The OFT principles state that consumers should be told up front about costs associated with a game or about in-game advertising, and any important information such as whether their personal data is to be shared with other parties for marketing purposes. The principles also make clear that in-game payments are not authorised, and should not be taken, unless the payment account holder, such as a parent, has given his or her express, informed consent.

Failure to comply with the principles could risk enforcement action.

Clive Maxwell, OFT Chief Executive, said:

'Many children enjoy playing these types of games. This rapidly growing creative sector has also brought wider economic benefits.

'The on-line and apps based games industry has already made significant improvements during our consultation process. But it still needs to do more to protect children and treat its customers fairly.

'Our principles make clear the type of practices that games makers and platform operators should avoid.

'Parents and carers have an important role to help protect their child and their bank balance. Our advice is that parents check their device settings, play their child's

games themselves and read the game's description online. Parents will also be encouraged to report concerns to Citizens Advice.'

Citizens Advice has incorporated the OFT's advice into its new page on online and in-app games. See its [AdviceGuide](#) website for more information. Consumers can also get advice or complain to Citizens Advice about online or in-app games by telephone or by visiting a Citizens Advice Bureau. The OFT, and the CMA from 1 April 2014, will have access to complaints and may use them in deciding whether to take enforcement action.

The Office of Fair Trading, and from April 2014 the Competitions and Markets Authority, will have access to information about complaints made to Citizens Advice and may use that information when deciding whether to take enforcement action