

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about STEAM

Steam is a computer gaming digital distribution platform and storefront. It is the biggest platform for desktop- or laptop-based gaming, with a range of more than 30,000 games available. The platform has become a lively social environment for many gamers, and allows people to trade, sell and buy gaming items for real money. Valve, the developers behind Steam, have also released different hardware that works with the platform, including the Steam Deck – a hand-held console that lets users play their favourite games while away from their computer.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

UNSUITABLE GAMES

Among the 30,000+ games on the platform, there are many that aren't appropriate for children. Individuals can view and download games featuring adult content if they verify their age – but, of course, it's easy to enter a false date of birth online. This can lead to children and young people finding games that they shouldn't have access to: featuring violence or profanity, for example.

SPENDING SPREES

Steam hosts regular sales – including some where game prices are reduced by up to 90%. Some sales promotions also include a mini-game or event which encourages users to spend more money. The sales can be an excellent time for young gamers to purchase the titles they've been wanting, but the attractive discounts can also promote impulse buys driven by the fear of missing out.

CONTACT WITH STRANGERS

Steam isn't a social media site, but it certainly shares some of their elements. Users can add other people as 'friends', for example (whether they know them in real life or not), and then communicate privately with them using text or voice chat. The platform also hosts public discussions and groups for socialising. Steam users can also leave comments on the profiles of other players.

POTENTIAL SCAMS

Sadly, Steam's immense popularity has made it a lucrative destination for internet scammers. The most common ruse is phishing: scammers send links to other users, aiming to trick them into entering their login details – which are then stolen. Once in control of the account, the scammer sends messages to everyone on the victim's friend's list, in an attempt to hijack their accounts too.

SHADY TRADERS

The Steam Community Market is a built-in trading area where players can trade resources for their games on the platform. Gamers can exchange items, or buy and sell them using real-world currency. It's possible for unwary users to be scammed through bad trade deals, and Steam doesn't usually get involved when this happens. There are also third-party trading websites, which can be risky to use.

SPARSE AGE RATINGS

Steam is a digital distribution platform for games of all kinds, including ones not rated by regulatory bodies. Getting a game rated takes a long time, and can be expensive, so developers only tend to follow that process when releasing a title that will be physically sold in shops. Most games on Steam, therefore, don't have an advisory age rating on the store page.

Advice for Parents & Carers

ENABLE PARENTAL CONTROLS

Steam does have some limited parental controls that can restrict exactly what games someone's account can view and access. This can be set up by navigating to the 'Family' tab in 'Settings', then selecting 'Manage Family View'. The platform then allows parents and carers to share a Steam account with their child and limit them to age-appropriate games.

USE GIFT CARDS

Having payment methods (like card details or PayPal) linked to a Steam account makes it very easy for a child to purchase new games or spend money on items in the marketplace. An excellent and safe alternative would be to buy a Steam gift card and let your child make their purchases with that instead – putting a manageable cap on how much they can spend on the platform.

APPLY STEAM GUARD

Steam Guard is an optional additional layer of security that protect accounts. Enabling it ensures that anyone attempting to log in to that account also needs to provide authorisation via their phone or email. The computer that your child uses Steam on can be authorised to prevent having to provide separate authentication for each login.

SHARE A LIBRARY

Using Family Library Sharing lets everyone at home share games across accounts (while still keeping their accounts separate). The entire game library from each account is shared with the other account holders – a great way to avoid having to purchase a different copy of the game for each of your children. However, if two users want to play the same game separately, you would need to buy it twice.

SAFE MODDING

Modifying a game to customise it or to introduce new content – known as 'modding' – is common on Steam. There's nothing inherently bad about modding, but installing the wrong mods can be disastrous: they can stop games from working properly, or at all. Steam's mods are unlikely to contain viruses or malware, but it's still possible – so ensure your child reads the mod's reviews first to avoid anything dangerous.

Meet Our Expert

Clare Godwin (a.k.a. Lunawolf) has worked as an editor and journalist in the gaming industry since 2015, providing websites with event coverage, reviews and gaming guides. She is the owner of Lunawolf Gaming and is currently working on various gaming-related projects including game development and writing non-fiction books.



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