



**PC World Canada**

Family-friendly gaming for summer distraction

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By Erin Bell

School's out for the summer, so let the games begin!

But how do you make your family's gaming experience safe, age-appropriate, hassle-free and fun? With tips and advice from PCWorld.ca's guide to family-friendly gaming.

### **Game ratings and guidelines**

There are plenty of games to choose from that are appropriate for kids, as well as a whole lot of them that aren't. Thankfully, for families that own a console or two the videogame industry has a rating system in place, like the movie industry.

It comes from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), and it lets parents see at a glance whether the game they're thinking about buying is child-friendly or not. Look for the ESRB symbol in the lower left corner on the front of every game box, accompanied by a symbol representing the game's rating. You can visit the [ESRB website](#) to learn more about the symbols and what they mean, but in a nutshell:

- EC (Early Childhood): suitable for ages 3 and up
- E (Everyone) suitable for ages 6 and up
- E10+ suitable for ages 10 and up
- T (Teen) suitable for ages 13 and up
- M (Mature) suitable for ages 17 and up

Many PC games carry ESRB ratings as well, although the majority of PC casual games (available for download on the web) do not, with the exception of the Vista-enhanced games offered on the [MSN Games portal](#).

### **Parental controls in Windows Vista**

With the launch of Windows Vista, Microsoft has introduced specific new features that help to make gaming a safer and more streamlined experience. The Games Explorer is a new dedicated folder for storing and organizing games. When a new game is installed on the computer, an icon will show up in the Games Explorer. Clicking on it displays information about the developer and publisher, whether your PC has the required [hardware](#) to be able to run the game, and the game's ESRB rating if it has one.

Games Explorer also lets parents set various limitations on a child's gaming experience through a series of customizable [parental controls](#). For example, parents can restrict a child's access to certain games according to age rating or content (for example, they can block games that contain instances of violence or blood and gore), and can also block access to specific games by title.

### **Desktop to Go**

If parents and kids are all trying to use the same family computer, the poor machine can get cluttered up pretty quickly. One solution to "PC clutter" is MojoPac, an interesting application that essentially turns any USB device (like a USB drive, external hard drive or even an iPod) into a portable PC desktop. Games and applications can be installed directly onto the MojoPac device, and when it is connected to a host PC, it will display a special desktop environment that allows access to those programs and files. When the MojoPac device is unplugged from the PC, no traces of the applications or files are left behind.

Children can have their own personal settings, browser shortcuts, instant messaging buddy lists, games, pictures and music without interfering with or cluttering up the family computer. Installing games on the MojoPac device means kids can take the device to a friend's house and play the same game on a different computer without having to re-install the software each time.

MojoPac can be downloaded from [www.mojopac.com](http://www.mojopac.com) for US\$49.99--about \$55 Canadian.

### **Start 'em early**

"Grown-up" PCs and videogame consoles might not be appropriate for very young children, but that doesn't mean they can't get in on the action too.

ClickStart My First Computer (\$69.99) from [LeapFrog](http://LeapFrog) is a great way for young children between 3 and 6 to start getting comfortable with computing in a safe and controlled environment. The sturdy plastic device plugs right into the TV and features a colour-coded QWERTY keyboard and child-sized mouse. Five built-in games teach the kids about letters and colours while they learn to type and navigate with the pointer. Additional packages of games, which include Toy Story, Dora the Explorer and Animal Art Studio, can be purchased for \$24.99 each.

Another neat plug-and-play device for tech-savvy tots is the WordLaunch Learn-to-Read-It System (\$49.99 - also from LeapFrog), which comes with a tray of 32 letter tiles that kids use to build 3- and 4-letter words through a series of animated games. Learn-to-Read-It is suitable for children aged 4 and up, and there are three levels of difficulty that teach about 3-letter words, consonant blends and silent "e" words.

### **Kid-friendly casual game portals**

Web games are fun pick-up-and-play distractions for kids. The good news for parents is that most Web games are free and are simply played within the computer's web browser so nothing gets downloaded to the computer. Check out the kids game portals at [YTV.com](http://YTV.com), [Yahoo Kids](http://Yahoo Kids), [Kids' CBC](http://Kids' CBC) and [Treehouse TV](http://Treehouse TV).

Casual game portals like [MSN Games](http://MSN Games), [Pogo](http://Pogo), [RealArcade](http://RealArcade) and [Big Fish Games](http://Big Fish Games) offer a wider variety of games that kids and parents can both enjoy. These games typically use the "try before you buy" model, where people download a trial of the game and can decide to purchase the full game if they like it enough. (Prices range from about \$10 - \$25.)

[Kidsmania](http://Kidsmania) is a subscription service that streams games straight to the PC's desktop. Users can select from a catalogue of more than 50 games (including everything from scrabble and pinball to commercial releases like Roller Coaster Tycoon 2 and Rayman 3). It costs \$14.95/month to subscribe to the Kidsmania service (or only \$6.95/month for Bell Sympatico subscribers).