

Best Online Games for Kids

Not all computer games are violent or frivolous. **SASHA GONZALES** suggests seven that are safe, entertaining and educational, too.



Beatrice Lim's eight-year-old son Ben spends a few hours a week playing online games. And the 38-year-old teacher encourages it. "Most parents have the perception that gaming is a waste of time, that it teaches kids to be violent and aggressive," she says. "But I believe that the benefits outweigh the risks – as long as you choose the games wisely and supervise the sessions."

Numerous studies have pointed to the advantages of online gaming for kids. Research done by Michigan State University scholars in 2011 found that both boys and girls who play computer games tend to be more creative.

Several other studies, by Daphne Bavelier, professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester in New York, show that gamers of all ages perform better than non-gamers on tests of attention, speed, accuracy, and multi-tasking.

Dr Lim Boon Leng, psychiatrist at Dr BL Lim Centre for Psychological Wellness at Gleneagles Medical Centre, agrees that online gaming can enhance a child's cognitive abilities: "Many games encourage exploration, foster creativity, and help kids become better decision-makers. They may also improve hand-eye coordination and visual-spatial ability. Multiplayer games are also beneficial as they teach children about teamwork and help to develop their social skills."

Here are our top educational game picks:

» For Ages Six to Nine



Smurfs' Village

THE AIM: To rebuild the Smurfs' village after evil wizard Gargamel discovers it and scatters the blue creatures all over the forest. The player adds houses, creates colourful gardens, builds bridges, lays stone pathways and more.

KIDS WILL LEARN... How to set and keep track of goals. It also inspires creativity as they redesign the Smurfs' village from scratch.

GET IT FROM: iTunes; free to play, but additional in-app content is chargeable. Works on iOS and Android devices, and the Kindle Fire.



The Bakery Shop

THE AIM: Setting up a bakery is fun but players must learn how to make a profit so they can repay their business loan. They have to figure out what items to sell and which resources to use. It boils down to making good choices to avoid losing money.

KIDS WILL LEARN... How to make the best use of limited resources, the importance of time management and the value of money.

GET IT FROM: www.thebakeryshop.org; free. Works on PC and Mac.



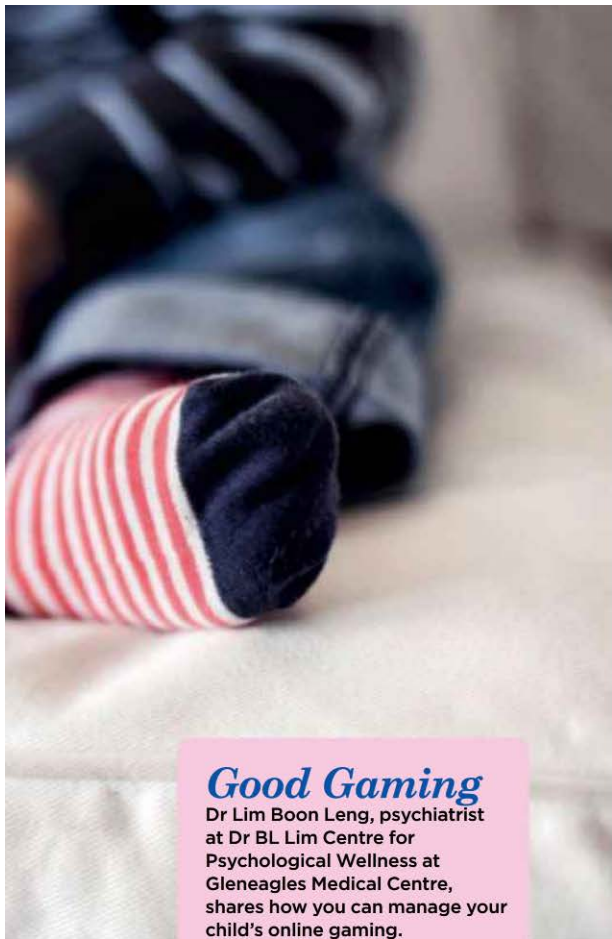
Whyville

THE AIM: Players engage in role play and simulation to earn a virtual salary in this award-winning learning site.

KIDS WILL LEARN... A range of subjects, from art and geography to marine biology, maths and civics. In addition, they'll pick up important lessons about the world around them.

GET IT FROM: whyville.net; free. Works on PC and Mac.

Main Photo: Getty Images



Good Gaming

Dr Lim Boon Leng, psychiatrist at Dr BL Lim Centre for Psychological Wellness at Gleneagles Medical Centre, shares how you can manage your child's online gaming.

- **MODERATION IS KEY:** Your child's time online should not be at the expense of more important activities, such as family bonding, schoolwork, time with friends, outdoor play, exercise and rest. Allocate specific times for online gaming and limit these to one to three hours a week – any longer and he could become addicted to gaming.

- **CHOOSE THE RIGHT GAMES:** Look out for age recommendations, and avoid games that have been rated "M" – these are for older players (aged 17 and above) and may contain strong language, sexual content and heavy-duty violence.

- **DO YOUR RESEARCH:** Try out the games yourself to ensure that they are appropriate, read online reviews and get feedback from other parents.

- **SUPERVISE GAMING SESSIONS:** Place the computer or tablet in a common area so that you can keep an eye on your child. Check on him regularly to ensure he is not doing anything inappropriate online.

» For Ages Nine to 12



Minecraft

THE AIM: There are two separate game modes: Creative and Survival. The first allows players to build huge structures using unlimited resources, while the second introduces enemies and monsters that players have to fend off. It also works as a multiplayer game.

KIDS WILL LEARN... Teamwork and cooperation, as well as geometry and maths (they have to build structures using cubes and pyramids). They'll also learn new words as they match names with items in the inventory.

GET IT FROM: minecraft.net; from \$8.98 for the pocket edition. Works on PC and Mac; Minecraft Pocket Edition is available for iOS and Android.



Secret Builders

THE AIM: Players build a virtual world, complete quests, create a home and interact with friends in the game. Budding writers can even submit their creative works for other users to comment on.

KIDS WILL LEARN... History, literature, geography, music and other subjects come to life as players go on quests with historical figures like Galileo, Shakespeare and Mozart. The website says that many of the games require strong use of logic and thus help to enhance foresight.

GET IT FROM: www.secretbuilders.com; membership starts from US\$5.95 (S\$7.56) a month. Works on PC and Mac.



Super Secret

THE AIM: Tweens create a 3-D character and then visit a virtual mall, where they can socialise with friends, shop the latest trends, play fun games and more.

KIDS WILL LEARN... Friendship, cooperation and teamwork.

GET IT FROM: www.supersecret.com; membership starts from US\$8.99 a month. Works on PC and Mac.



Wizard 101

THE AIM: This is a magic-themed, multiplayer fantasy game that opens up a whole new world for kids in which they can take part in adventures, duel against mythical creatures, raise virtual pets and design their own castle.

KIDS WILL LEARN... How to read better and faster as they follow the fully narrated storyline. Plus, it will fire their imagination!

GET IT FROM: www.wizard101.com; free, but certain geographical zones require a subscription. Works on PC and Mac.