RECLAIMING FOCUS: DIGITAL LIFE DISCUSSIONS

# Gaming and Group Chats

Monthly family conversations on technology, media, and what protects attention.

**The Browning School · Tuesday, November 17, 2026 · 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. on Zoom**

# How the hour runs

| TIME | MOVE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|
| 20 minutes | Tips and hot topics | What the research says, and what is working for families now. Whole room, all grades. |
| 25 minutes | Workshops by age group | Five Zoom rooms, each working on its own grade section and its own Family Media Agreement. |
| 15 minutes | Report back | Each room names one change it would make. That line goes into the revision file. |

You are co-authors of the guide, not an audience.

# This is where his friendships live

**97%**

of US boys aged 13 to 17 play video games. Six in ten play every day.

**64%**

of children aged 8 to 17 were added or invited to at least one group chat in the past four weeks.

Gaming: Pew Research Center, 2024, US teens 13 to 17. Group chats: Ofcom, 2026, UK children 8 to 17.

# For boys, gaming is mostly social

**94%**

of boys who play, play with other people

**58%**

often feel part of a group that likes them while gaming

**56%**

have made a friend online through a game

Screens meet real needs. Blocking the activity does not remove the need.

Pew Research Center, 2024 (94%, 56%) · Common Sense Media, Boys in the Digital Wild, 2025 (58%, boys 11 to 17 who game)

# Ask who, how he feels after, and what it crowds out

**Boys who are not lonely**

**74%**

often play games online with friends

**Boys who report loneliness**

**55%**

often play games online with friends

**How often they game**

**No difference**

Lonely and not lonely boys game about equally often

This is a correlation, not a cause, and it does not show that who he plays with always matters more than how long. It adds two questions worth asking at home beside the hours.

Common Sense Media, Boys in the Digital Wild, 2025 · 1,017 US boys aged 11 to 17

# What actually counts as a problem

**2 to 3%**

meet the clinical definition. It is a small minority, and families can address problems long before this threshold.

### THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION DEFINITION

- He cannot control it
- It takes priority over everything else he used to care about
- It continues despite clear negative consequences
- It is costing him school, family, or friendships
- Normally present for at least twelve months

**Hours played is not one of the criteria.**

WHO ICD-11, in force since 2022 · prevalence from Stevens and colleagues, 2021, 53 studies, 226,247 people, mixed ages and screening methods, with a published correction. Not a rate for school-age boys.

# Pay attention to the conversation around the game

**70%**

have seen bullying or harassment at some point

**23%**

see or hear it often or very often

**54%**

have stood up for someone being targeted

More than half have already stepped in. The question at home is not whether he will see it, but whether he knows what to do when he does. The chat is one part of it. Spending, game design, and what gaming crowds out all matter too.

Common Sense Media, Boys in the Digital Wild, 2025 · base is the 955 boys who play games with text or voice chat

# Group chats go wrong in four ways

### He did not ask to be there

A third of children were added to a chat with no invitation at all. All four boy accounts in one study were added by strangers.

### He cannot leave

Children describe pressure to stay in a chat whatever is in it, because leaving is read as dropping out of the group.

### The room moves without him

Exclusion is the harm children name most. The chat he is not in is the one that stings.

### Nothing is private

A screenshot travels. One boy learned he was being mocked in a chat he had already left.

None of these is fixed by a setting. All of them are easier if he already knows you will not take the phone away for telling you.

Ofcom, Children's Online Experiences, 2026 and Children's Media Lives, 2025, UK children 8 to 17. US corroboration on where the harm concentrates: Pew Research Center, 2026, 1,458 US teens 13 to 17.

# When something has already happened

## What he does

Three questions to ask about what he is seeing or about to send, and what to do about each.

**Is it problematic?** Mean-spirited, a photo used without consent, or something that needs tone and context to make sense. **Pause.**

**Is it bigger than me?** Anything disparaging, disturbing, or dangerous. **Reach out** to a trusted adult.

**Is it complicated?** A thing that will not get sorted out by typing. **Move it offline.**

## What you do

In order, and the first one is the one that matters.

**Make clear he will not lose the phone for telling you.** Fear of losing it is the main reason boys stay quiet. You can still act on what you hear.

**Screenshot it, then stop.** He is told that screenshots escalate things, and that is right for him. You are keeping a record, not passing it on. Do not delete it and do not forward it, including to another parent. One exception: if it is a nude or sexual image, do not save or send it to anyone. Stop and call the school.

**Decide the next step with him.** Ask what he needs before you act on his behalf.

**Tell us.** A group chat is not off school grounds. Start with his advisor.

The three questions are adapted from Thumbs Down. Speak Up., a recommended resource for tweens. Browning has no partnership with them.

# If you change one thing, change the bedtime routine

**237**

notifications a day, at the median. Snapchat and Discord send the most of any app.

**59%**

used a phone between midnight and 5 a.m. on a school night, about twenty minutes at a time.

**41%**

of teens who play say gaming has cost them sleep. Two thirds of those who say they play too much.

### What this looks like at home

Phones and consoles charge outside the bedroom. Screens off an hour before bed. Notifications off overnight, which is a setting, not a negotiation.

Notifications and overnight use: Common Sense Media, Constant Companion, 2023, 203 young people aged 11 to 17, Android only. Sleep: Pew, 2024.

# Rules work differently as he gets older

### Younger children

Limits track with less problematic use. Setting them is the job, and you do not need his agreement to do it.

### Older teenagers

The same limits stop helping, and in one study were linked to more problematic use. A rule he had no part in starts working against you.

### What seems to carry over

How a rule is set and explained tracks with better outcomes than how strict it is. The evidence here is early.

**WHY THE FAMILY MEDIA AGREEMENT IS BUILT THIS WAY**

Browning recommends writing the rules with your son, so that he can explain why they exist. This is our recommended approach rather than an established finding. It is not an argument for having no rules.

Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study, the largest US study of child development: 11,868 children at 21 sites, followed for years, measuring real device use rather than estimates · Geurts and colleagues, 2025, 315 Dutch adolescents, for the age figure

# Three places to set limits

LAYER ONE

## The house

Your home wifi. A scheduled pause stops the console and the chat at the same hour, whatever device he is holding.

eero, Verizon Home, Xfinity, Spectrum

LAYER TWO

## The school account

Follows the login, not the laptop. It reaches homework, not his console or his group chats.

GoGuardian Parent

LAYER THREE

## The personal account

His Apple ID or Google account, and each game or chat account under it. Who can reach him is set here.

Screen Time, Family Link, Roblox, Discord, Fortnite, Snapchat

Almost everything we talked about tonight lives in layer three, which is also the layer Browning does not touch. And a setting is only half of it: age checks can be fooled, and nothing in any layer can see inside a group chat.

Every control a family has sits in one of these three places

# Why he tells you, or doesn't

**79%** would turn to a parent

**70%** name their father, against 14% an influencer

Most boys would tell a parent. Whether yours does depends on what he thinks will happen next.

### Say that asking for help is safe

Boys stay quiet because they have already predicted the consequence. Say tonight, before anything happens, that coming to you will not automatically cost him the phone.

### Keep the stakes low the rest of the time

Families who talk about his online life in ordinary moments hear about the bad ones. The conversation you want in a crisis is the one you have been having all along.

### Do not underreact either

"Just ignore it" teaches the same lesson as taking the phone. If he brought it to you, it cleared a high bar, and there is probably more underneath it.

### Tell him before you act

Before you contact the school or another parent, say so and agree the plan together. Acting over his head confirms he was right not to tell you.

**AND ONE THING TO TRY IN THE MOMENT**

Boys take practical help more readily than emotional help. "What do you want to do about it" often lands better than "how are you feeling about it."

Common Sense Media, Boys in the Digital Wild, 2025, 1,017 US boys 11 to 17 · Snap Digital Well-Being Index, 2025, 9,037 teens, young adults, and parents across six countries, published by Snap · Wisniewski and colleagues, Penn State, 2017, on why they stay quiet

# Where to start, by band

| GRADES | GAMING | GROUP CHATS |
|---|---|---|
| K to 2 | Play in a shared room. Chat off, which is already the default for the youngest accounts. | None yet. Family messages only. |
| 3 to 5 | Look up the game before he plays it. Set voice chat to friends only. | Set contacts only, and rehearse what he does when a message turns mean. |
| 6 to 8 | Money in games: loot boxes, skins, and the spending caps you can set tonight. | Before the first chat or Discord account, write the rules together and the reasons beside them. |
| 9 to 10 | Ask what he is like in there, not only what he sees. | Move from checking to asking. |
| 11 to 12 | Negotiate rather than impose, and expect to lose some of it. | Hand over the managing: Do Not Disturb, muting a chat, leaving one. |

The actions come from pediatric and online-safety guidance. The grade placements are Browning's judgment. Argue with the placements in your workshop.

# Six things worth reading

IF YOU READ ONE THING

**Thumbs Down. Speak Up. Family Toolkit**

Short activities to do with your son, including the one your room worked through tonight. A recommended resource, free.

**Parents' Ultimate Guides**

Common Sense Media, one per platform: Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft, Discord. The best first stop.

**Group Chats and Middle Schoolers**

American Academy of Pediatrics. The only guidance on this written by clinicians. Short and practical.

**Game reviews by title**

Common Sense Media. The habit worth building: look it up before he plays it, not after.

**Epic Games parental controls**

Worth knowing because the defaults are stricter than most parents expect, including a daily spending cap for under-13s.

**Your 10 to 12 year old's digital world**

Common Sense Media. Covers the first group chat directly, which is where most of our questions start.

All six are free. Every link is on tonight's handout and at focus.browning.edu. Start with the first one.

# Find your room

Join the room for the grade your son is in now. If you have sons in two bands, pick one and use the feedback form for the other.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ROOM 1 · K to 2 | **Circles of Consent** | Who can reach your son right now, and what would have to be true before you let someone new in. **Handout →** |
| ROOM 2 · 3 to 5 | **Fire Drill** | A group text turns on a boy in his class, and your son is watching. What does he actually do next? **Handout →** |
| ROOM 3 · 6 to 8 | **Flip the Script** | He asks for a group chat or a Discord account. Instead of listing your worries, ask him what you should plan for. **Handout →** |
| ROOM 4 · 9 to 10 | **Drop the Why** | Take the last question you asked him about his phone or his gaming, and rewrite it without the word why. **Handout →** |
| ROOM 5 · 11 to 12 | **Move It Offline** | Write the message you would send to move a hard conversation with him off text and onto a call. **Handout →** |

**IN THE ROOM**

Pick a timekeeper and a scribe first. Your handout has the activity and your son's Family Media Agreement. All five are at focus.browning.edu/discussions/2026-11-17. Before the room closes, the scribe posts one change you want made to the guide in the chat.

# Tell us what should change

Every change this room asks for goes into the Family Media Agreement for your son's grade. That revision becomes next year's guide.

> Scan the code, or go to
>
> **forms.gle/hdkaLfXUfnQcNJnz9**
>
> The same questions your room worked through. Open all week.

The guide says it will be updated as our community keeps learning. This is how we keep that promise.

Drafted with AI assistance, then reviewed and edited by Browning faculty and staff. Developed and revised with our community over the past year.