

Nerfing gender roles and rigid masculinity:

A practical guide to gender-sensitive game safety and design



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This resource brings together the important work of key partners across the child rights, gaming, and tech sectors, in influencing the safety and inclusion practices of emerging digital gaming environments.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Methodology	4
Part I: Strengthening player-facing policies	5
Community standards	6
Developer standards	11
Summary of policy interventions: community & developer standards	13
Part II: Designing a gender-inclusive product	15
Improving individual player experiences vs community-wide interventions	16
Creating room for emotional expression and diverse identities	20
Adapting help-seeking strategies to accommodate all genders	23
Current help-seeking mechanisms in games and their limitations	24
Shifting to supportive parental controls	27
Summary of product interventions: community-wide and player-side	29
Key takeaways	30
Part III: Conclusion	33



Introduction

Online games are a central part of adolescents' lives today and a space for them to establish social connection and identity. With today's evolving technologies, however, the risks of harm and abuse found in online platforms are growing. While much has been written about the harms girls face online, the risks to adolescent boys in gaming environments are less frequently examined. Yet these risks are real: from potentially abusive conversations to manipulation through in-game mechanics, to the normalization of harmful behaviours and recruitment into extremist subcultures.

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Game companies operate in fast-moving, highly competitive markets where player engagement and retention are key. This guidance speaks directly to that reality. It outlines practical and actionable ways to reduce the risk-enabling practices in games, while continuing to support engagement and growth. It views the existence of safer, more inclusive game environments as a contributing, rather than contradicting, factor to the fun and entertaining spirit of games. Key business goals are also achieved when there is effort to build long-term trust, reduce churn, and create more loyal, diverse communities of players.

It is worth noting that game developers - employees at companies who are directly involved in creating games - are one part of a broader ecosystem. This includes (a) other teams such as legal, communications, marketing, public policy as well as (b) other types of ecosystem players such as app stores, digital distribution services, and operating systems. While we raise some potential interventions that these other agents

can introduce, **this guidance primarily addresses developers while acknowledging the parameters of their role in the wider ecosystem.**

The guidance is presented in three major parts.



Part I covers policy interventions with a focus on community standards and developer standards



Part II addresses product interventions, both community-wide and player-side, designing for the needs of diverse players, and the role of parental controls



Part III presents the conclusions and recommendations for overarching calls to action.

Our purpose in creating this guidance is to provide insights and informed considerations for gaming companies to spark meaningful, collaborative conversations **on approaching game safety with a gender-sensitive lens.** This was developed with the intention of supporting adolescent boys (from the minimum age allowed on gaming platforms to age 18), but the recommendations also contribute towards making games more gender-inclusive across the spectrum of identities. This is based on our evidence and experience that interventions which address challenges faced by adolescent boys, can represent critical opportunities for the transformation of gender norms and power dynamics - ultimately benefiting users across the gender spectrum. This is not unique to this challenge, and other fields like accessibility have also noticed that designing products with the most vulnerable populations in mind, likewise bring benefit to all populations using the product.

Introduction

Methodology

In developing this set of recommendations, we initially reviewed currently available policy guidance and product features that support gender-sensitive approaches to online gaming, with a focus on the experience of boys, girls and non-binary players aged 6 - 18. We then conducted key informant interviews with 17 representatives across game developers, civil society, and third party service providers, to ensure that the eventual guidance would be relevant and in line with online gaming companies' needs and priorities.

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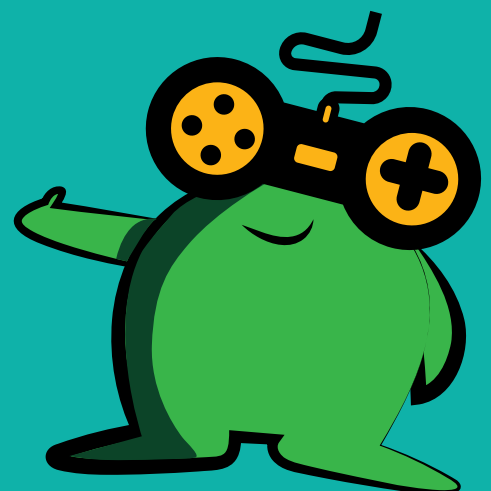
This work builds on many outstanding existing resources like the [Geena Davis Institute Gaming Playbook](#), the [Thriving in Games Group's Digital Thriving Playbook](#), and the [UNICEF RITEC Design Toolbox](#). This guidance calls for a set of supports designed to enhance and localise what companies are already doing in trust and safety, making those efforts more meaningful, effective, and attuned to gendered experiences. We also highlight the importance of increased attention to collecting and analysing disaggregated data, including by gender, to better understand how exploitation manifests and to ensure interventions are appropriately targeted.

Part I:

Strengthening player-facing policies

Policies establish standards for how players should behave and engage as they use various gaming platforms. At the core of these standards are the values that a gaming community aims to foster in order to provide the best experience to players. Given that the social experiences of young players are continually shaped by the digital games and platforms they engage with, clear and inclusive standards are essential.

This section outlines opportunities for developers to strengthen their player-facing policies by more explicitly addressing, both in clarity and depth, gender identity and expression and gender-based harms, in ways that resonate with adolescents and youth.



Community standards

Goal

Policies and enforcement guidelines explicitly mention prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression with more detail than just listing gender as a protected class.

Policies in this context refer to external-facing usage guidelines to players, users, and/or developers communicated via website, in-game or in-product messaging, or gamified tutorials. Policies around content and conduct are presented in terms of service, user level agreements, community standards, “positive play” guidelines or charters, marketplace guidelines, and other formats.

There is an opportunity for more detail around gender-related harms in community standards. Key informant interviews highlight that most game studios do not design with adolescent or gendered experiences in mind, particularly if they claim not to make games for young people. As a result, most platforms have prohibitions against harmful user-generated speech that include gender, but only where it is one of a number of categories such as ethnicity, religion, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

While gender is typically included as a protected category, providing explicit guidance on both harmful behaviours to avoid and positive behaviours to promote in gender-related interactions may offer players clearer direction and support more respectful in-game conduct. The following can serve as guidance for developers when addressing these.

Prohibited behaviours



Emotional shaming along the lines of gender stereotypes

Mocking players for expressing vulnerability, empathy, fear, or sadness

Shaming players for interests or behaviour perceived as “girly” (e.g., liking art, dance, pink, or nonviolent games)

Enforcing narrow ideas of masculinity, like insisting that “real men” must be aggressive, stoic, dominant, or straight

Using phrases like “man up,” “don’t be a pussy,” or “boys don’t cry” to belittle emotional expression

Insulting others with feminizing or emasculating language (e.g., calling someone a “sissy,” “soyboy,” “beta,” etc.)

Ridiculing boys or men who talk about mental health, gender exploration, or feelings

Misogynistic and homophobic slurs

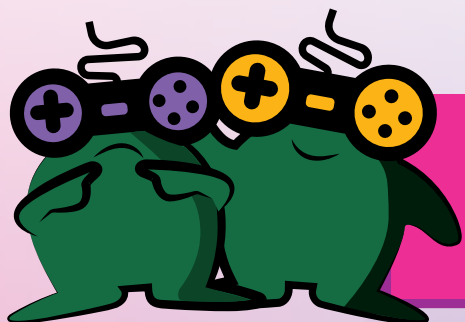
Using slurs that equate femininity with weakness or inferiority

Policing sexuality or gender expression through insults like “that’s gay” or “you sound like a girl”

Harassing players based on perceived gender nonconformity, including body shaming or voice shaming

Attacking girls or nonbinary players for being “too masculine” or “too feminine”

Encouraged behaviours



Supporting players who express emotion

Reacting supportively when someone shares frustration, fear, sadness, or stress (e.g., “Yeah, that sounds rough” instead of “man up”)

Having supportive emote options

Challenging gender stereotypes perpetuated by other players



Replying to language like “don’t be a girl” or “you sound gay” with responses like “that’s not cool” or expressing opposition to that language

Offering a counterbalance to macho pressure in group chats: “You don’t have to be loud to be a good teammate.”

Defusing peer pressure that discourages self-expression (e.g., “Let him play how he wants” or “Everyone’s welcome here”)

It's worth noting that imposing a blanket ban on these behaviours could feel heavy-handed or overly prescriptive to players, especially in competitive or fast-paced gaming environments where banter, sarcasm, and emotional detachment are often normalised. Interviews highlight that players might perceive guidelines around behaviour as moralising or out of step with the "fun-first" culture they expect, potentially leading to disengagement.

Some players may actively push back against these guidelines by engaging in ironic toxicity, baiting, or the use of coded language as workarounds to moderation, especially from players who see themselves as defending "free speech" or resisting perceived cultural overreach.

Policy teams may wish to adapt these recommendations based on game, brand, and player demographics as a way to balance norm-setting without alienating players. Policy teams could also consider a staged approach around any associated punitive measures for violating these policies and collect feedback and observe behavioural trends to inform next steps.

Spotlight: Discord

In enforcing policies, certain flagged content and behaviours may fall under gray areas. Discord uses these moments to further sharpen and expand their policies so they can continue to create their ideal environment for all users. Defining a "north star" or the core intention behind the policy helps them navigate complex situations. For teen users, Discord uses a warning system specifically designed to create learning moments for young users rather than immediately punishing them.

Read more: discord.com/safety/bringing-policies-to-life

Addressing different modalities of abuse in youth-friendly language

Updating external terms of service and community and developer standards can help companies acknowledge and explain different types of abuse in clear, youth-friendly language. This includes verbal abuse like name-calling or threats, visual abuse such as sharing upsetting or inappropriate images, behavioural abuse like exclusion or manipulation, and systemic abuse where game systems are used to target or control others.

Rather than using formal or legalistic terms, which are frequently dismissed altogether, companies can follow examples like Xbox's approach to addressing "trash talk", and explain harmful behaviour in a way that resonates with young players and is contextualised to their playing environment. For instance, phrases like "teasing that goes too far," "using your rank to scare someone," or "tricking someone to make them feel small" help players, especially boys, recognise these patterns without feeling blamed or confused. These explanations should be short, easy to read, and placed where young users will see them, such as in onboarding tips, help menus, or pop-ups when reporting someone.

At the same time, **companies have an opportunity to challenge harmful ideas about masculinity that encourage boys to act tough or stay silent when hurt.**

Companies can teach empathy in language boys relate to like "real gamers have each other's backs," "check before you joke," or "speak up for your squad", making safety feel like a shared value, not a punishment.

Developer standards

Goal

App stores propagate guidance to game developers to promote a wider range of gender-inclusive representation and game features.

App stores play a role in shaping the standards of digital environments, especially those frequented by children and teens. By providing clear guidance to game developers on gender-inclusive design and safety practices, app stores can help ensure that virtual spaces reflect the diversity of their users and actively reduce the risk of harm.

Streamlining guidance to developers can include sharing best practices in a few different avenues:



Guidance on representation and gender-inclusive options (e.g., nonbinary avatars, customisable pronouns, flexible character traits)



Guidance on protecting against age and identity-based harms



Guidance on power and abusive behaviours within games

Spotlight: Roblox

Roblox's tools and techniques for developers guides them on building inclusive games, streamlining resources by consolidating accessibility tools, best practices, and external frameworks into one developer-friendly hub. It highlights built-in features like text-to-speech and customisable controls, while also pointing to community plugins and expert recommendations. By emphasizing structured feedback and inclusive design from the start, it helps developers efficiently create experiences that are accessible to all players.

Read more: <https://create.roblox.com/docs/en-us/platform>

App stores can play a role in encouraging developers to offer a wide range of representation options, such as nonbinary avatars, customisable pronouns, and flexible character traits that are not tied to traditional gender roles. These options could allow all players to see themselves reflected in the game world and to explore identity in safe, affirming ways. App stores can elevate this by making inclusive design a quality signal, rewarding apps that adopt these practices with greater visibility, trust badges, or editorial features.

Beyond representation, app stores could offer structured guidance on preventing age and identity-based harms, such as addressing specific risks like power imbalances between players. For example, Unity's [moderation manual](#) specifically calls out predatory behaviour where a player uses their authority to entrap or exploit others. Centralising this guidance ensures developers do not overlook these considerations, and it positions app stores as key enablers of safer ecosystems.

Summary of policy interventions:

Community & developer standards

WHY IT MATTERS



The policies and standards currently in place in gaming platforms around prohibiting discrimination on gender identity and gender expression can be substantially improved. The practice of just listing gender as a protected class is not sufficient to deter harmful behaviour, such as emotional shaming along the lines of gender stereotypes or misogynistic and homophobic slurs.



Conversely, and crucially, such limited policy does not promote positive behaviour in the gaming environment, such as supporting players who express emotions or challenging gender stereotypes perpetuated by other players.



Continuing to address these issues in such a manner limits the detail needed to stem gender-based abuse and move to fostering spaces that allow players to feel safe, respected, and empowered. The positive is that there are concrete, actionable ways to do so that still fall in line with business goals.

MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS



Taking on such change is recognisably a challenge for companies and developers concerned about players perceiving such guidelines as heavy-handed, moralising, or undermining enjoyment. Worries that players will react with disengagement, or push back through toxic behaviours or workarounds to moderation are valid and should be acknowledged as a hurdle.



App stores may not see the potential they hold as key enablers of safer ecosystems, yet they are in a position to be leaders in the effort to support companies and developers by providing clear guidance on gender-inclusive design and safety practices.

To support both developers and app stores, best practices and case studies and concrete, actionable recommendations can successfully further these efforts.

BEST PRACTICES TO CHECK OUT



Xbox:

Approach to “trash talk” uses phrases that make sense to adolescents, such as “teasing that goes too far,” “using your rank to scare someone”



Roblox:

Tools and Techniques for Developers’ provides guidance on developing with inclusivity in mind, including gender



Unity:

Moderation manual specifically calls out predatory behaviour where a player uses their authority to entrap or exploit others

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR DEVELOPERS

Avoid formal/legalistic terms when acknowledging and explaining different types of abuse and associated policy, standards, and guidelines by using youth-friendly terms (e.g., clear, short, easy-to-read) and placed where they can be easily seen (e.g., onboarding tips, help menus, and pop-ups when reporting abuse).

Consider a staged approach around any associated punitive measures for violating these policies, and collect feedback and observe behavioural trends to inform next steps.

Further these efforts by challenging harmful ideas about masculinity that encourage boys to act tough or stay silent when hurt through teaching empathy, done so with relatable language such as “check before you joke,” “speak up for your squad”.

FOR APP STORES

Provide clear guidance to game developers on gender-inclusive design and safety practices in the areas of representation and gender-inclusive options (e.g., nonbinary avatars, customisable pronouns, flexible character traits), protecting against age and identity-based harms, and power and predatory behaviours within games.

Make inclusive design a quality signal, rewarding apps that adopt these practices with benefits, such as greater visibility, trust badges, or editorial features.

Part II:

Designing a gender-inclusive product

It is given that not every playing experience will be a positive one. Though product policies, at the minimum, can strive to prevent disruptive harms and allocate avenues to address them, **game features have the potential to do more in fostering safe, inclusive and gender-transformative gameplay.**

These recommendations outline opportunities for developers to integrate more norm-changing details in game design. While product interventions can often feel like the sole responsibility of a developer, it is worth highlighting that the interventions below cannot take place in a siloed environment. Developers need others within the organization and advisory groups who can advise them on the broader ramifications of the game.



Improving individual player experiences vs community-wide interventions

We asked key informants how they would prioritise between interventions aimed at improving individual player experience (e.g., block/mute tools) versus community-wide interventions (e.g., toxicity reduction systems). Overall, informants agreed that companies should prioritise a holistic approach: heavily emphasise community-wide interventions, integrate them directly into the product experience, and complement them with individual player tools and effective in-app policy education. Across game developers, service providers, and civil society, there was consensus on this topic.

A standardised approach to communicating norms is unlikely to be universally effective, and designers need to take into account the diverse nature of their player base and the specific social dynamics inherent in their game.

[Research](#) suggests that in some instances, toxicity has been so normalised that positive and helpful suggestions are perceived by players with skepticism and incredulity. Similarly, suggestions to engage prosocially were perceived by players as “distracting” from gameplay in one study, but this was not a ubiquitous finding within the research literature.

Multiple informants highlighted that young people, especially adolescent boys, frequently do not read or engage with external policies. This renders policy-focused interventions less effective on their own if they are only live on a website. Instead, “gamifying” civility and safety in a lightweight manner, such as part of onboarding, could be more effective for youth-oriented games.

Spotlight: Club Penguin

Club Penguin offers Online Safety Tips for young users by framing encouraged safety behaviours in a light, easy-to-understand tone while also, in the same text, introducing the system-side features available to support them like content filters and moderators.

Read more: cplegacy.com/safety

Interviews also underscore the need to shift from solely punishing bad actors to helping them understand and address the root causes of harmful behaviour. This can be done through **prosocial design** and in-platform interventions. One design choice would be to leverage in-game touch points, such as loading screens, to communicate or remind players about norms or tools available to them to customise their experience. However, this needs to be carried out carefully and tailored to the game culture, which varies widely across genders and countries. **Considering gender-inclusive experiences early in game development could allow developers to build game-agnostic principles for balancing growth with inclusivity.**

A game that consistently provides in-game rewards for players who exhibit positive conduct, such as demonstrating they understand player behaviour expectations, assisting newcomers, participating constructively in community events, or maintaining a high reputation for fair play, can help cultivate a norm of positive and engaged participation within its player base.

In practice, **prosocial design** can look like:

Real-time feedback loops

Clear, in-game examples of reportable behaviours to make it easier for players to understand what constitutes harmful conduct

Integration of safety and norms throughout game design

Moving beyond siloed reporting systems, interstitials during natural breaks to deliver bite-sized safety messaging, tying inclusivity to game mechanics and rewards to create organic and positive community experiences

Designing moderation cues inside the game

Making safety visible and accessible, strategically using gameplay pauses, pop-up messages and educational modules when rules are broken. Discord [shares](#) how it adapts pop-up language after a violation to appeal to a teen's mental state of being in that moment.

In some cases, it may not always be effective to immediately reach out to a player after they have experienced a negative event. Instead, giving them space for a cool-off period first can result in a more positive outcome when the platform does reach out. However, in instances of serious harm - for example, the occurrence of grooming - it is essential to intervene immediately.

Key informants also saw individual player tools playing a complementary role, with block and mute tools serving as an important baseline and bare minimum for individual player safety. But to further sharpen community-wide interventions, developers could also consider:

More specific reporting



Adding gender-based harassment indicators in reporting to drive behaviour change and make the system more precise



Giving players more specific feedback on their reports and swiftly acting on reports to build trust in the system



Taking action against bad actors, even high-value players who may drive substantial traffic to the game

Nuance in matchmaking and support



More nuanced matchmaking that takes additional signals of potential toxicity into account, such as tracking blocking behaviour post-match



Supportive, non-stigmatising reporting mechanisms, along with graduated support options for navigating uncomfortable situations

It is worth noting that different [types of games and design elements](#), including core engagement loops, reward mechanics, [game “moods”](#) and the presence or absence of social features and user-generated content, can significantly influence user experience and behaviour. These variations are critical considerations when drafting policy recommendations or informing product design changes, particularly when designing with youth and adolescent boys in mind.

These recommendations should be interpreted with an understanding that context-specific factors will require tailored approaches, and that more research is needed in this space as it relates to the specific needs of youth and gender.

Creating room for emotional expression and diverse identities

The worldbuilding, character arcs, or reward systems of games, in addition to external-facing content policies, could make norm-changing feel native to the platform.

A concept from accessibility design known as the [curb cut effect](#) refers to how features designed for people with disabilities often end up benefiting everyone, not just the intended users. Applied to the challenge of restrictive gender norms in games, **the curb cut effect could mean creating game systems that are intentionally designed to support emotional expression, empathy, and diverse identities.** These systems would not only benefit those who might face challenges because of toxic masculinity or restrictive gender norms, but also enrich the experience for all players.

By embedding emotional expression as a central gameplay mechanic, the game would support not just players who are looking for emotional depth but also those who may have been conditioned to suppress their feelings.

Designing for all emotional experiences

By embedding emotional expression as a central gameplay mechanic (e.g., rewarding empathy, allowing for a broad range of emotional reactions to situations), the game would support not just players who are looking for emotional depth but also those who may have been conditioned to suppress their feelings. Players who do not initially feel restricted by gender norms will also benefit from these systems by experiencing a richer, more dynamic gameplay environment. For example:



A “comfort” option where players can choose to ease the tension in a group player setting, thereby unlocking new dialogues or rewards, might improve the experience for everyone, not just those who need emotional support.



Optional prompts, narrative supports, or gameplay adjustments that guide players in emotionally sensitive scenarios, particularly in team-based settings or in moments of character growth.

Open-ended character design

Such design might operationalise as allowing and empowering players to define and evolve their character's gender identity and expression throughout the game. Instead of assigning fixed roles based on gender, players could mix and match traits of their gameplay avatars, such as strength, adventurousness, humility, wisdom, creativity, with no expectation tied to gender. This could allow all players to explore a spectrum of identity without being confined to rigid gender expectations.

Spotlight: Cyberpunk 2077

Cyberpunk 2077, while designed for players aged 18+, offers a relevant example for open-ended character design: It gives players freedom to fully customise the origin, physical appearance, and attributes of V, the game's protagonist. A wide array of choices are available to determine not only the preferred body type and skin tone, but also voice tone and even genitalia. The game's romance arcs depend on the chosen body type and voice, but not on the character's genitalia or origin story. Creating the character, therefore, does not need to adhere to binary standards. Players also choose the attributes they want to assign, defining which skills their character would be more proficient at, going into the game.

Read more: cyberpunk.fandom.com/wiki/Cyberpunk_2077_Character_Customization

Gameplay elements emphasising cooperation and emotional intelligence

Weaving gameplay elements like cooperation, emotional intelligence, and support into traditionally combat or competition-driven games could also actively challenge rigid gender norms around masculinity and encourage more skills to be rewarded beyond winning or combat skills. **This could include team dynamics where players are encouraged to check in with others emotionally or create community-based challenges that focus on helping, rather than defeating, others.** Players who might have been more focused on competitive achievements now have new paths for progression through supportive roles, making the overall experience more engaging and enjoyable for everyone.

Spotlight: Overwatch

Overwatch's 'role queue' concept allows players to pre-determine the role they want to play in their match, lessening the tension that occurs among players when some have to "fill in" to balance their team's composition. It ensures that players are evenly distributed in the support, damage, and shield roles. Role selection also gives an estimated queue time based on the demand for a certain role and players can reap an in-game reward if they queue for a role that is in high demand.

Read more: overwatch.blizzard.com/en-gb/news/23060961/introducing-role-queue

Diverse emotional arcs

Developers who make emotional growth or vulnerability a trait common to characters across all genders can encourage such openness or introspection as moments of strength. Players who are comfortable with emotional openness will find these moments enriching, while those who might not have experienced vulnerability in their own lives can learn from and engage with these expressions in a supportive context. Similarly, offering rewards and progression paths that highlight emotional intelligence - comforting teammates, resolving conflicts, or choosing empathy-driven dialogue options - might benefit players who traditionally may have focused only on strategy or combat, creating a richer gameplay and more rewarding experience.

Adapting help-seeking strategies to accommodate all genders

Differences in the way adolescent boys seek help

Adolescent boys and girls often experience similar levels of distress, loneliness, and harm in online games, but differ substantially in how they seek support. Girls are generally more willing to ask for help through traditional means, such as direct reporting tools or reaching out to trusted adults or moderators. Admittedly, this openness often comes with a fear of being blamed or shamed, especially when reporting gendered harassment, which can discourage follow-through. Nonbinary and LGBTQIA+ youth may hesitate to engage with help systems that do not acknowledge their identities or feel like they were designed for someone else entirely. The tools, however, do carry some value.

Adolescent boys may seek help in indirect ways, mask their calls for help in aggressive tactics like reciprocal harassment, or express a need for help only after being repeatedly exposed to harm.


Boys, in contrast, tend to be more reluctant to seek help through direct reporting tools. This is often rooted in social pressures to appear self-reliant, emotionally tough, or dominant – norms that are reinforced within gaming cultures. Instead, adolescent boys may seek help in indirect ways, mask their calls for help in aggressive tactics like reciprocal harassment, or express a need for help only after being repeatedly exposed to harm.

Adolescent boys are more likely to block or ignore someone than to report them, and may view help-seeking as an admission of weakness. When they do seek help, they often prefer private, one-on-one methods such as ticket-based support, and request confidentiality to avoid peer conflict. **They also respond better to action-oriented language rather than mental health framing.** Being prompted with “Take a break,” “Go outside,” or “You’ve got backup” feels more comfortable than “Talk about your feelings.”

Current help-seeking mechanisms in games and their limitations

In this context, most in-game help-seeking tools are designed as if they work equally well for everyone. These might look like nested reporting options buried in sub-menus, strong language in reporting flows like “harassment” or “grooming,” and designed for players who already have a keen understanding of what constitutes abuse. These systems were observed to work better for girls who may be more emotionally literate or accustomed to adult-style help systems, though they still face hurdles such as stigma, lack of trust in follow-up, or fear of retaliation. They are significantly less effective for boys, who may never reach the point of engaging with the tool at all.

Additionally, players across all genders often report that they don’t know what qualifies as reportable, or that they believe nothing will happen after a report is submitted.



Many reporting flows are designed in a choose-your-own-adventure style that places the burden of action on the victim rather than the system. This can be overwhelming, especially for younger users.

Many reporting flows are designed in a choose-your-own-adventure style that places the burden of action on the victim rather than the system. This can be overwhelming, especially for younger users. Furthermore, most interfaces lack visible or responsive feedback. Young players do not often hear back from the game once they have submitted a report, which can feel invalidating and discourage future attempts to speak up. Current systems also rarely account for masked help-seeking behaviours, like rage-quitting, purging friend lists (a known signal of depressive behaviour), or indirect disclosures via avatars or bios. These signals are often missed.

Adapting help-seeking mechanisms to reflect adolescent boys' needs

To design effective help-seeking systems for all genders, game developers should create multiple, low-friction entry points into support. These range from reactive reporting tools to proactive, ambient systems that meet players where they are. These are a few key strategies to consider:

● Make help-seeking feel natural, not stigmatised



Build voice, tone, and interaction models that normalise asking for help. Instead of using charged words like “report” or “abuse,” ask simple questions like, “Something seemed off. Want to tell us what happened?”

● Make reporting and help-seeking tools feel more practical



Avoid burying reporting tools in settings; instead, trigger them more actively based on keywords, unusual behaviour (e.g., friend list purges), or prolonged time spent in a distressing area of the game.

● Provide real feedback and transparency



Players of all genders need to know their reports are taken seriously. Notify users of the outcomes of their reports.



For boys who worry about peer perception, private acknowledgments that a report was reviewed, without public broadcast, can encourage repeated use.



Reduce the cognitive burden on players who have already been harmed by investing in better moderation tooling, behavioural signals, and automated pattern detection, so the onus is not solely on the individual to report.

Design for representation without over-segmentation



Use moments in onboarding or progression to introduce behavioural norms and explain how to seek help. These could include non-intrusive, scenario-based training that models positive behaviour and how to respond to harm.



Reinforce that help-seeking is a strength, not a weakness; the [Digital Thriving Playbook](#) provides some great examples of how to do this.



Instead of expecting players to declare their gender during help-seeking, build systems that reflect diverse needs. For example, offer reporting via text, emoji reactions, or even gameplay actions. Voice-masking and non-verbal communication options can help those who are uncomfortable or feel unsafe speaking out.



Use immediate, action-oriented nudges after incidents (e.g., “Take five,” “You’re not alone,” “That wasn’t okay”) instead of delayed moderation emails. Intervene when grooming or predatory behaviour is detected, but also give players cool-off periods when needed.

Partner with trusted external entities



Many young players are more likely to trust non-profit organisations or recognisable child advocacy brands than the game publisher itself. Bringing them into the ecosystem as in-game help resources or redirecting users to their content can provide an additional layer of trusted support

Shifting to supportive parental controls

A final note on parental controls is warranted as part of the overall ecosystem of gaming among youth. Parental controls have historically been framed as a form of supervision or gatekeeping, an approach perhaps most compellingly advanced by the very name. From limiting screen time to blocking access to certain features, they are often framed as policing tools, rather than supportive scaffolding for young people as they are navigating online spaces.

Yet young players, and especially adolescent boys, may also reject overt restrictions, seeing them as a challenge to their autonomy or social status in the game. Many teens bypass parental controls entirely because the systems feel one-sided, stripping them of agency. Instead, they may opt for workaround tools like creating new accounts, impersonating other users, or avoiding detection.

Parental controls can be designed that emphasise partnership over policing.

● **Smarter parental controls for better support**

Parental controls can be designed that emphasise partnership over policing. Some measures include:



Avoid over-safety and surveillance.

“Cabined accounts” are accounts for young users that have certain features disabled by default or anonymised setups. In some contexts, these can strip away customisation, identity, and meaningful social connection, which are critical elements of adolescent boys expressing themselves as players in a gaming context. While well-intentioned, these setups often discourage boys from reporting because they feel infantilised or controlled.



Gradual exposure to risk.

Just as in real life, adolescents need room to practice safe decision-making in age-appropriate ways. Overly strict systems delay this development and push boys to seek independence via “unlocked” or falsified accounts. Parental controls should provide scaffolding for autonomous experiences – for example allowing ‘chat’ with friends but not strangers, or permitting specific game modes with guided debriefs afterward.



Gender-aware customization.

Such customisation should be integrated into parental dashboards. As mentioned previously, boys’ signals of distress may not mirror those of girls or nonbinary youth—they may withdraw, rage-quit, or stop customising avatars. Systems that help parents recognise these patterns (without invading privacy) can prompt better conversations and timely support.

Summary of product interventions: Community-wide and player-side

WHY IT MATTERS



Cultivating an atmosphere of positive conduct that serves to promote civility and safety is paramount to stemming the tide of normalising toxicity in game culture.



Boys in particular may be 'suffering in silence' or reacting with passive-aggressive behaviours as they receive social messages that their feelings of hurt and vulnerability must be suppressed, which hinders their ability to express emotions in a healthy manner.



Presently, the majority of policies, help-seeking tools, and follow-up of gendered harassment reporting in games unduly place the burden on the victim rather than on the system.



Current parental controls further exacerbate alienation by sending a message of mistrust, resulting in a missed opportunity for guidance.



However, there are a number of efforts that developers and companies can undertake to promote overall emotional intelligence, gender identity and expression, and relatable, effective help-seeking.

MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS



Youth, especially adolescent boys, are not engaging with external policies or are finding workarounds, and this presents a challenge for developers to 'think outside the box' with the language, placement, and interactions players have with these policies and help-seeking tools.



It is not as simple as interventions that are either community-wide OR individual-player based, but must be prioritised as a holistic approach.



Designing for and rewarding positive emotional expression, such as empathy, conflict resolution, and cooperation in games that are based on competition or combat may feel very counterintuitive to developers, and will necessitate particularly sensitive efforts to maintain the social dynamics and culture of certain games.

Key takeaways

Creating emotionally safe and inclusive gaming environments is decidedly a work in progress, but there are many feasible actions developers can take that can advance this effort. An approach that holistically considers both community and individual interventions balances the responsibility of reporting between players and systems through designing to promote prosocial behaviours, emotional intelligence, and help-seeking without stigma, into gameplay. Part of the equation is also that parental controls shift from policing adolescent boys to partnering with them.

Reducing the normalisation of toxicity through accessible, nuanced safety tools is essential, especially for adolescent boys. By building such tools to support autonomy and identity, a collaborative, safe, and fulfilling gaming experience for adolescent boys can be more fully achieved. The outcome can be an experience that successfully balances the enjoyment of the game with inclusivity and safety.

To support developers and game companies, best practices and concrete, actionable recommendations can successfully promote these efforts.

BEST PRACTICES TO CHECK OUT



Club Penguin:

Community-driven norm setting in a joyful way, without making players self-conscious



Club Penguin, Cyberpunk 2077 and Magic Potion:

Allow for non-gendered avatars



Discord:

Adapted pop-up language following a violation to appeal to teens' mental state in the moment



Marvel Rivals:

Notifies users of the outcomes of their incident reporting

USEFUL REFERENCES



Digital Thriving Playbook:

Reinforcing that help-seeking is a strength, not a weakness



Framework & Taxonomy of Videogame Playing Preferences:

Addressing types of games and design elements such as core engagement loops, reward mechanics, and monitoring of social features and user-generated content



Curb Cut Effect:

Informed by the concept of accessibility design of features for people with disabilities often results in benefiting everyone

RECOMMENDATIONS

PROSOCIAL DESIGN

Consider real-time feedback loops with clear examples of reportable behaviours, integrate safety and norms throughout, and build in visible, accessible moderation cues inside the game, such as gameplay pause and pop-ups.

Advance beyond basic block and mute tools to include specific and nuanced feedback and reporting, such as gender-based harassment, and taking swift and firm action to build trust.

INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

Embed emotional expression as a central gameplay mechanic, particularly rewarding those that foster emotional self-awareness and regulation, such as cooperation, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence

Embrace open-ended character design that allows players to define and evolve their character's gender identity and expression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

HELP-SEEKING

- Reduce help-seeking stigma by promoting this as natural through choices in tone and interaction models that replace 'report' and 'abuse' with approaches like, "Something seemed not right. Want to share what happened?"
- Design for representation without over-segmentation by presenting norms and how to seek help in onboarding and progression, and allowing a variety of reporting means, with the underlying message of help-seeking as a strength.
- Provide authentic feedback and transparency, being aware of burdens on young players around areas like taking responsibility and being concerned that reporting will be public (especially for boys), and sending sensitive but immediate action-oriented responses versus delayed emails.
- Develop with partnership rather than only policing in mind, being aware and respectful of the need for autonomy and identity expression, including allowing but monitoring gradual exposure to risk as adolescent boys mature and as they practice managing such situations successfully.

Part III:

Conclusion

Online games can either reinforce restrictive gender norms or actively model more inclusive, emotionally healthy play. This guidance shows that most games still rely on overly-broad policy statements and one-size-fits-all safety tools, leaving adolescent boys - who are least likely to self-advocate - without meaningful support. By contrast, games that weave empathy, flexible identity options, and low-friction help pathways into core design could play a more meaningful role in supporting adolescent boys in gaming, while creating a generally beneficial experience across all genders.



A few key findings:



Policy granularity matters. Simply listing “gender” as a protected class does little to curb harassment; players respond better when community standards spell out concrete examples of harmful talk (e.g., “man up,” “don’t be a girl”) and prosocial alternatives (“check before you joke,” “speak up for your squad”).



Product design can influence culture. Real-time feedback loops, open-ended avatar systems, and mechanics that reward cooperation or emotional intelligence can normalise healthy masculinity without compromising competitive play.



Help-seeking remains a weak link. Current report flows assume players recognise abuse and will navigate buried menus; girls engage despite stigma, but boys often disengage entirely. Multi-entry, stigma-free channels—paired with visible follow-up—are essential.



Parental controls should scaffold, not police. Overly strict “cabined” accounts drive teens to work-arounds; graduated risk exposure and dashboards that surface distress signals (rage-quitting, friend-purges) foster partnership instead of rebellion.

Game developers reading this guidance can take away a few key calls to action:



Elevate your community standards. Replace generic legal language with youth-friendly examples of both prohibited and model behaviours; pilot a staged warning system before harsher penalties.



Bake safety into the loop. Use loading screens, cooldown timers, or post-match summaries to surface brief norm cues and one-tap report buttons; reward empathy or conflict-resolution achievements alongside wins and kill-streaks.



Redesign reporting for boys. Offer context-sensitive “Something felt off—want to tell us?” prompts, private acknowledgements of action taken, and emoji or gameplay-based reporting options that avoid the word “abuse.”



Shift parental tools from control to co-play. Provide settings that let teens chat with friends but not strangers, and alert caregivers when sudden behaviour changes suggest distress, all without exposing private messages.



Measure what matters. Collect anonymised, disaggregated data (including gender identity) on harms, help-seeking, and intervention outcomes; share insights across the industry to accelerate learning.

Finally, no one set of guidance can cover everything. This guidance is based on 17 key-informant interviews and a targeted review of current design practices and policies. As such, findings may not fully capture regional or genre-specific dynamics, nor the perspectives of players outside the gender binary. Additionally, many insights rely on expert observation rather than longitudinal player data.

We recommend greater investment in future research to explore several critical gaps. These include:



Experimental testing of the proposed design patterns in this guidance, such as flexible reporting flows or prosocial mechanics, across different genres and player demographics.



Intersectional analysis that considers how gender interacts with race, class, LGBTQIA+ identity, and language in shaping both in-game experiences and help-seeking behaviour.



The evolving role of the creator community, who now act as cultural architects within games. Their norms, language, and modded spaces often set behavioural expectations just as powerfully (if not more) than platform policy. Research should examine how to engage creators as allies in fostering inclusive, emotionally literate gaming environments.



Longitudinal studies on whether embedding emotional intelligence and community-based rewards meaningfully reduce harm and improve retention over time.

Strengthening the evidence base in these areas will allow gaming studios to make more targeted, culturally responsive investments. We have a rich range of opportunities to shape gaming environments where all players, regardless of gender, feel seen, supported, and safe.



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