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Apex Legends is a multiplayer battle royale video game which is free to play. In this game, twenty squads consisting of three players each are dropped onto an island from a dropship, where they compete against each other to be the last team standing. Each player on the squad gets to choose a 'Legend' to play with; one of eight unique characters with a specialised skillset in either 'Offense', 'Defense', 'Support' or 'Recon'. The players begin with no weapons or equipment and have to comb through an ever-shrinking play area for these, all the while killing enemies to emerge as the victorious trio. The game is currently available on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

What parents need to know about APEX LEGENDS

VIOLENCE

Realistic versions of modern day firearms and gunfire, coupled with intense firefights, blood spatter effects on screen and large explosions make this game appear more violent than the less graphic Fortnite; a game similar to Apex Legends. Players use a variety of modern military weapons such as sniper rifles, machine guns, pistols, knives and frag grenades. Besides frantic gun battles, players also get to perform finishing moves on weakened enemies. These include electrocution, stabbing them with knives, beating them with fists, and using chemical gas attacks on multiple opponents before 'finishing them off'. These attacks are often shown up close and from the victims' perspective also. In light of this, PEGI has rated this game suitable for children 16 and older in the UK and Europe, while in the US it is rated 13+. Overexposure to such violence can cause distress to younger children.

IT CAN BE ADDICTIVE

Children love to play battle royale games, due to their competitive nature. However, the chance to play with friends against 57 other players might put undue pressure on your child to play at a certain time when their friends are online. This might also mean that quitting half-way through the game could prove detrimental to your child's team mates. Children might therefore feel compelled to play the game until they achieve their desired results. Even though a typical game might last around 25 minutes, children may feel angry if they lose and decide to play another round.

PLAYING WITH STRANGERS

Since Apex Legends is an online game with a squad of three players, your child will need two other friends to play with. If the friends are not on the same gaming platform, then your child will have to play with strangers. Players usually communicate with each other through headphones and microphones and this always carries the risk that they might be exposed to unpleasant graphic language or harassment (via the voice or on-screen text chat settings of the game), from people they don't know.

ABUSIVE PLAYERS & CHEATERS

As with any online game, there is a risk of players using intimidation and abusive language. This risk is increased when children play games with strangers. Another potential threat are the hackers who might encourage children to cheat in the game and make money off them.

IN-GAME PURCHASES

Although anyone with an EA account can download and play this game for free, it does allow players to make a variety of in-game purchases with real money. Ranging anywhere between £7.99 and £79.99, players can purchase Apex Coins, the primary in-game currency. These in-game purchases allow the players to unlock cosmetic upgrades for characters as well as new 'Legends' more quickly than regular gameplay. Apex coins can be used to purchase Apex Packs containing 'loot boxes'. These allow players to collect rare items. Unlike many other battle royale style games, there are no duplicate items in 'loot boxes', which can incentivise children to purchase them more frequently. Other free in-game currencies such as 'Crafting Materials' and 'Legend Tokens' can also be used to unlock these upgrades through regular gaming.

GAMEPLAY VIDEOS

In order to better understand and improve their game, children might be tempted to use sites such as YouTube and search for Apex Legends gameplay videos. This might introduce them to obscene language used by gamers in these videos. Many videos on YouTube do not have age ratings and the ones that do display warnings for age restricted content are easy to bypass by signing in. In addition, children may be further exposed to inappropriate content when watching other 'suggested videos' that pop up on YouTube. Watching videos online of players opening their loot boxes on Apex Legends is one of the latest crazes. Although there is little risk attached to this, it may encourage your child to purchase loot boxes.

Top Tips for Parents

JUDGE FOR YOURSELF

Before exposing your child to any game involving violence, it may be a good idea to judge the appropriateness and impact of that game by previewing online clips of it first, or even by playing the game yourself. If you deem it suitable, only then allow your child to play the game. Moreover, you can take steps to ensure that the age restriction set by the particular game is being met and that no underage children are playing the game. You can also carry out regular open and honest conversations with children on the negative effects of violence, so that children have a clear idea of what it entails in real life.

MONITOR SEARCH ENGINES

In order to prevent your children from falling prey to obscene language online, it is important to monitor social media and search engine usage. Parents can restrict access to inappropriate content by blocking certain websites. With the help of activity log, parents can ensure that their children are not using any app or browsing any website unsuitable for their age. Parents can also look up safe search engines and browsers for children that have age appropriate filters and pre-screened child friendly content. When your child plays games online, it's important to have open and honest discussions with them regarding their activities and encourage positive behaviour towards others, as you would in 'real life'.

PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS

Communicating with teammates is an essential and enjoyable part of the game. Parents should encourage children to play the game with friends they know and trust. However, if that is not possible and your child is playing with strangers in their team, you can always mute them on the inventory screen during the game. In addition, the 'ping' feature can be used to allow players to communicate non-verbally i.e. by 'pinging' locations (within the game), objects, and enemies.

RESTRICT PAYMENT METHODS

If you do not want your children to make any in-game purchases or microtransactions, you must ensure that none of your debit/credit cards are linked to their player account or consoles. If your child plays the game on PlayStation 4 or Xbox One, you have the option of creating a child account which will prevent them from registering your credit card. Further to this, if you share your console with your child, you can password protect your account to prevent them from making any undesired purchases. You have to keep in mind that if you don't password protect your account and your child makes any unwanted purchases from an adult account, it's unlikely that you'll be able to claim refunds.

REPORTING ABUSIVE PLAYERS AND CHEATERS

Parents should make their children aware of how to report abusive players and block them while playing Apex Legends. The game's publisher, Electronic Arts (EA) has clear instructions on their website on how to report harassment. PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have their own reporting mechanisms and it is essential that your child knows these to report any untoward behaviour by any player. Children should also be told never to share any personal details with any players and report cheaters at once. The developers of Apex Legends take cheating quite seriously and banned around 16,000 players for cheating in the first two weeks of the game's release. Game developer Respawn announced that over 350,000 players were banned on PC alone through it's through its Easy-Anti-Cheat software.

LIMIT GAME TIME

With any new game that becomes an overnight success, it is important for parents to keep an eye on their children and see how it affects them. If you think your child is becoming addicted to playing the game, you can use parental controls on PC or on Xbox to limit the time they play the game for. For this particular game, since it would be difficult to leave partway through the game, you can find it more worthwhile to impose a limit on the number of matches your child plays, rather than the time the game is played for. As always, open and honest conversations with your children are critical; talk to them about the negative consequences of too much 'screen time'.