

Minecraft – A parent’s guide to Minecraft

Dive deeper into the choose-your-own-adventure world of Minecraft, the quirky building game that can keep children hooked for hours, but has lots of learning benefits, too.

What is Minecraft?

Minecraft is a sandbox-adventure video game. The style is called "sandbox" because it provides a creative landscape with no fixed goal and endless possibilities. Its blocky design is rather child-like, too: Characters' heads are square, colours appear in chunks, and even trees look like they were grown in a Lego lab. Like any playground, Minecraft doesn't come with instructions, and it's relatively simple to pick up and play. You learn the game through exploration, experimentation, watching YouTube videos, and reading other fan-created content (there's a lot of it online). And the more you play, the more you learn what to do and how to use the available resources, such as redstone and different kinds of ore, to make ever-more-complex tools and structures.

How do you play Minecraft?

The first thing you do in the game is create a world and name it. Then you set off exploring it and building it as you go. You might pick up some wood from a tree and hone it into a batch of sticks. You can add more wood to the sticks and make a pickax. With the pickax, you can mine some stone to build a house. And so goes the cycle of the game. While you're exploring, you might encounter characters called hostile mobs, which could be spiders, zombies, and endermen (black creatures with glowing eyes). Depending on the difficulty level you set, you can track your character's health stats and maintain them as you're building your world. The story in Minecraft is whatever you want it to be, and you can play it by yourself or against others in multiplayer.

What are Minecraft's different modes?

Minecraft offers three modes of play: Adventure, Creative, and Survival. Each has four levels of difficulty: Peaceful, Easy, Normal, and Hard. The difficulty levels determine how threatening the mobs are, up the ante on your health stats, and add other challenges.

Adventure and Survival modes are similar, but Adventure mode is designed for gamers to play on downloadable game maps created by other players. These modes have you battling hostile creatures, building structures, and continually managing your health stats. Creative mode is the best option for novices and younger players: It gives you full access to all the resources in the game so you can build endlessly without worrying about dying or fending off mobs (you'll see them, but they leave you alone).

Is Minecraft safe?

Minecraft can be played very safely. In single-player Creative mode on the Peaceful setting, for example, there is no interaction with others and no conflict. But eventually, most children want to play with others, and multiplayer gaming invites some risks. Though Minecraft communities are generally welcoming, and server moderators are responsible for keeping things orderly, children can get exposed to strong language, bullying, and even hate speech. Minecraft isn't immune from predators, either. And since fans of the game range in age all the way up to adult, the player-created environments can contain bloody (but not gory) battles, sexual scenarios, and other mature content. If you want to allow your child to play multiplayer, the best way to reduce the possibility of exposure to age-inappropriate language, content, and interactions is for them to join a "realm," an invitation-only personal Minecraft server for up to 10 players created by

someone they know. Otherwise, find an established server with very good moderators, such as one of these vetted Minecraft servers or one just for children.

What is the right age to start playing Minecraft?

Because of its complexity, potential for mild violence, and online community, we recommend Minecraft for children age 8 and up. If you have younger children who want to play but aren't quite ready, you have options. These Minecraft alternatives can occupy them with a very similar style, without some of the tougher stuff. And if you decide to let younger children play, we suggest playing along with them or keeping their game in a common space where you can supervise.

Is Minecraft free to play?

Minecraft isn't free. You may see ads for free Minecraft downloads on the internet, but they're scams. The computer versions of Minecraft cost around £30. Console versions vary in price. Minecraft also has in-game purchases for game accessories such as skins (aka clothing), textures (to change objects' appearance to, say, bricks), and worlds created by other players. You can set up an account in the Minecraft Marketplace and use Minecoins to buy items. Though these purchases help you personalize your world -- and look cool -- they don't have the same sought-after demand of items in other games, such as Fortnite, whose exclusive releases add competition and even highlight socioeconomic differences among players. If you just want to test out Minecraft to see whether it's right for your child, you can download a free Minecraft trial that gives you five sessions.

Is Minecraft violent?

Minecraft can be violent -- but it doesn't have to be. Creative mode, for example, has no violence -- you'll encounter hostile mobs, but they don't attack. On the higher difficulty levels, you'll need to fend off -- and sometimes kill -- various scary creatures, including the infamous Ender Dragon. If children play multiplayer, other players can be aggressive and set traps for your character that you have to fight your way out of. There's a version of the game you can play in "hardcore" mode, which ruthlessly eliminates players who die, instead of allowing them to re-spawn, as on easier levels. But overall, the blocky graphics make the visual experience mild and not at all realistic.

Can you do cross-platform play on Minecraft?

Yes. As of December 2019, all systems -- including PlayStation, Xbox, and Switch -- allow for cross-play, so anyone can play with others regardless of their operating system.

Can you chat with strangers in Minecraft?

If you're playing a multiplayer game, you can interact with other players through text chat. But you can hide the chat window if you don't want to see messages or interact. To minimize contact with strangers, you can join a server organized by someone you know or set up your own. Players can also play "local" games with people in their homes.

What is a Minecraft mod?

A Minecraft mod is something that can be downloaded from the internet to change elements of the game. Mods can include custom skins for avatars, extra resources, and even themes (such as the popular dark theme, which makes it look like you're playing by moonlight). There are millions of mods, but you have to be careful of the sites offering downloads because they can contain malware and viruses. Always make sure your antivirus software is up to date, and only download mods from forums that are well-established

(for example, ones where known players and moderators hang out). Microsoft offers mods and mod creators, as does CNet's Download.

What is a Minecraft server?

A server is a software setup that lets players organize and control multiplayer games. If you're playing multiplayer, you either have to know the name of the server you want to join or get invited by the host. Anyone can set up a server, but it's a little technical -- and it's a big responsibility because the host is in charge of the players. While some folks set up a server just for friends or one game session, there are a lot of dedicated Minecraft servers, some just for children or families. For example, Autcraft is a Minecraft server designed just for children on the autism spectrum, and Famcraft is a server that's family friendly. The folks behind these established Minecraft servers put a lot of effort into building communities around the worlds they make, and they tailor the game-playing experience for their specific audience.

Can my child play with friends on Minecraft?

Yes, it's possible for your child to play with their friends. It's easier on console versions, because you just need to know your friends' gamertag or player ID to add them to your session. It can be a bit more complicated on PC and mobile systems, because you both have to be on the same server. There are mods and other methods -- including manually -- to add friends to your dedicated friend lists. Minecraft offers instructions for playing with friends.

Are there predators on Minecraft?

There's always the possibility that players can run into predators on some servers, especially if the moderation is lax. It's safest to play on a well-known, established server rather than joining one at random. Minecraft allows you to mute and block players and report them for inappropriate behavior. Review all of the game's settings with your child if they're playing multiplayer, and learn more about talking to your child about online predators.

Why does my child like watching people play Minecraft on YouTube?

Children like watching people play Minecraft for a variety of reasons: to learn new techniques; enjoy others' skills; keep up with the latest news; and feel like part of a community. But entertainment value is probably the biggest draw: The top Minecraft players have gained celebrity status in the gaming world, and they can be funny, interesting, and even personable. As long as your child is watching age-appropriate channels and balancing their screen time with other activities, watching people play video games is just like any spectator sport. Get tips on how to talk to your child about watching Minecraft videos on YouTube.

Who are the best Minecraft YouTubers for children?

While there are plenty of child-friendly Minecraft players, such as Stampylonghead, who use their videos to teach tricks and share secrets, children looking for Minecraft videos can easily stumble across age-inappropriate content. Many YouTube gamers offer videos on a wide assortment of games, including ones geared for older players, such as Grand Theft Auto. And older players, such as the infamous Swedish gamer PewDiePie, use pretty strong language. You can suggest your child use the YouTube Children app to find age-appropriate Minecraft videos or subscribe only to channels you've preapproved. When your child is first getting into Minecraft, it's a good idea to watch videos with them so you can get a sense of the tone and content.

A few we like are:

PopularMMOs. Hosted by Pat and Jen, a formerly married couple, PopularMMOs is, like its name, very popular with children and has spawned a line of children's books about Minecraft. Jen also has her own channel, **GamingWithJen**.

DanTDM. Dan Middleton, a happy, friendly, British gaming enthusiast, shows off cool, new features of Minecraft and other children's games.

Aphmau. In addition to Minecraft, channel star and mom Jessica Bravura shares vignettes of her family's life, YouTube "challenges," and new games other than Minecraft.

CaptainSparklez. Jordan Maron -- better known as "CaptainSparklez" -- is one of YouTube's most popular gaming personalities, with millions of subscribers tuning in to watch his Minecraft parodies, reaction videos, and Let's Plays.

Is Minecraft educational?

Games that allow for exploration and creative expression -- instead of imposing a rigid structure -- can be good for learning because they stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving, and systems thinking (learning how things work together). Minecraft's focus on building can reinforce geometry concepts, as it strengthens players' logic skills, creativity, and even collaboration. But the educational value of any piece of media has a lot to do with who's guiding the learning. To boost any skills your child may be gaining from Minecraft, you can ask questions about their experiences as they're playing, such as, "Why did you build that?," "How did you make that?," and "How do you feel when you make a cool structure?" Minecraft offers an education edition that offers downloadable lesson plans and other educational resources for using Minecraft in the classroom.

Could my child get addicted to Minecraft?

Since Minecraft doesn't have an end point, it can be incredibly compelling. But even though some children have a really hard time tearing themselves away from certain games -- and some say they feel "addicted" to them -- that's probably due to other factors such as what's going on in their lives rather than a true dependency. With all media, it's important to help your child learn to self-regulate, since you won't always be around to cut them off. Start by having a conversation about all their daily duties and figure out how much game time fits in. Create a calendar, have them set a timer, and reward them for sticking to the time limits. If you've tried this and want more control over their screen time, consider installing a parental-control program that lets you set daily screen limits for different programs.

Information on this page has been adapted from:

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By Caroline Knorr 25/05/2020

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