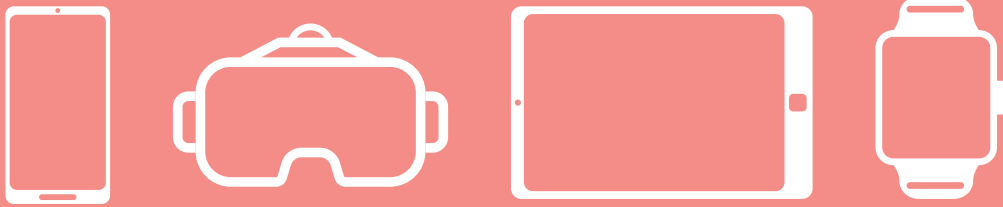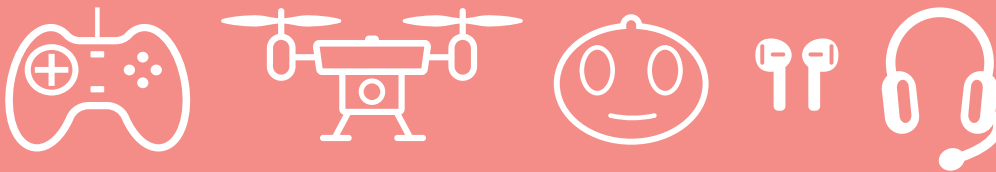# CYBERSAFE KIDS

Gadget Gift Guide

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SO...WHY A 'GADGET GIFT GUIDE'?

Although Christmas might be one of the most popular times to buy gifts, with birthdays, confirmations and other celebrations, let's face it, it's an all year round pursuit!

Our research shows us that in Ireland, smart device ownership is 100% by the age of 14 years old* and that's why we've designed this CyberSafeKids *Gadget Gift Guide.* It will help you – as parents and guardians – be better informed before purchasing smart devices for your children and young people.

This easy reference guide covers different smart devices and toys, highlighting the benefits and risks, what you can do to make them safer, and any age recommendations that are in place. We've also supplied some useful links which will allow you to find out more from the official manufacturer's websites.

Whatever the time of the year you're giving internet-enabled gadgets as gifts, we hope it's a happy one!

Alex Cooney,
CyberSafeKids CEO

*Unless otherwise indicated, all statistics are taken from Left To Their Own Devices, CyberSafeKids 2023-24

TABLETS

DID YOU KNOW THAT 59% OF IRISH 8–12 YEAR OLDS OWN A TABLET, MAKING IT THE MOST POPULAR SMART DEVICE WITH THAT AGE GROUP?

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

Watching a video or playing a game on a tablet – like an iPad, Amazon Fire or Samsung Galaxy – can certainly be a great way to keep fidgety hands busy in a noisy restaurant or to kill time in an airport and give yourself a little peace and quiet! There are so many fabulous games and apps available for education and entertainment, and with the mobility tablets have over desktop PCs or TVs, they can be a great asset for families on the move. If your tablet is connected to the internet, however, your child is potentially at risk of encountering harmful content or harmful contact.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

There are no age requirements for a tablet, but it's worth remembering that if you're buying one for your child (or just lending them a family device), you should continue to monitor and supervise its use at all times.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

The answer to that question lies with you! While tablets may not have the exact same functionality as a phone, the online environments they provide – messaging apps, video sharing platforms like YouTube, and gaming portals like Roblox – come with the exact same risks of harmful content and contact as smartphones. Following the advice below will minimise these risks.

– **If you are using video streaming apps, use child-friendly versions like YouTubeKids or a 'clean profile' set up with an appropriate maturity rating (e.g. on Netflix, Disney+)** – remember that the algorithm will suggest content based on what you have been previously watching so switch profiles when sharing devices

– **If kids are gaming, encourage 'computer only' play** and if there are other players present online, keep an eye on chat boxes (or friends/followers lists)

– **Agree clear time and content restrictions**

– Think about **quality over quantity** of screentime; it's more about what they're doing, not just for 'how long'

– **Check browser history** and homescreen regularly for new or unfamiliar apps

– **Encourage headphone-free usage in shared family spaces** so you can intervene quickly if required

– **Don't allow tablets into bedrooms at night:** charge them in communal areas

– **Use parental control platforms** such as **Google Families** or Apple's **Family Sharing**, allowing you to control downloads, set time limits, and much more

For more advice, check out our **Better Digital Parenting booklet**

GAMING CONSOLES

DID YOU KNOW THAT GAMING IS THE MOST COMMON WAY FOR 8-12 YEAR OLDS IN IRELAND TO SPEND THEIR TIME ONLINE?

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

Gaming consoles are just one of many smart devices you could have in your home, and as such, the risks are similar to those present on other smart devices like tablets.

The good news is that children can learn a lot of important skills through the games they play, as well as having fun of course! Games can present opportunities to be creative, problem solve, develop strategic thinking skills, hone decision-making and fine motor skills, and work and collaborate virtually with others. They could also, however, be exposed to harmful or mature content through the games that they play, especially with the current generation of consoles, where there is an almost movie-like realism in action adventure and role-play games. 20% of 8-12 year olds have already played a game with a rating of 18+, a rating that only the most extreme games are assigned!

Online gaming, sometimes combined with platforms like Twitch (13+) and Discord (16+) for streaming and communication, can be the first opportunity a child has to chat with others online. This can present a steep learning curve for children, who can subsequently be exposed to inappropriate content, scams, grooming and cyberbullying.

Memberships and subscriptions can make great gifts, but they can also be confusing, and a child with access to a digital store and in-game purchases may sign up or pay up without fully understanding the consequences. It is very easy for children to become overwhelmed with advertisements or offers and lose track of spending, especially when dealing with virtual currencies or randomised purchases (aka 'loot boxes', where you do not know what you are getting until after you have purchased them).

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

While games consoles themselves do not have age ratings, you should consider the age appropriateness of the games your children are playing, as well as the interactions they may be having with others as they embrace and enjoy 'all things game'.

GAMING CONSOLES

DID YOU KNOW THAT 57% OF 8-12 YEAR OLDS IN IRELAND HAVE THEIR OWN GAMING CONSOLE?

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

Well, it really depends! There are real risks. Thankfully though, there are also steps you can take to reduce the chance of those risks becoming actual harms.

Use parental controls on gaming consoles
Using parental controls, you can set time limits and spending limits, filter content, and restrict contact with others. Use the links to find out more;

Playstation | XBox | Switch

Although it's not a console, Steam has parental controls for PC (computer) gamers out there

Assess game suitability before beginning
If you are buying a console, take these 3 simple steps before deciding on games:

1. Check a game's official age rating, which provides more than a recommended age but also content descriptors and warnings you need to know about e.g., bad language, fear, and violence

2. Read reviews of the game

3. Watch pre-recorded or live streamed gameplay on YouTube or Twitch to see firsthand what your child will experience

Agree communication rules for being online
1. Game with friends or against the computer, never with strangers

2. Be kind, be inclusive and report bad behaviour to the service (and to you!)

3. Understand contact dangers on online services that often accompany gaming, e.g., Twitch, Discord

Understand memberships and control purchasing behaviour
1. Memberships like Playstation Plus, XBox Game Pass, and Nintendo Switch Online Membership can make a great gift but make sure you understand what you are signing up for before committing to regular or automated payments

2. Set spending limits for your child via parental controls or remove your payment details

3. Gift cards can be used to track and manage spending and make a great gift on special occasions like Christmas: always buy these from trusted retailers

Don't allow tablets into bedrooms at night: charge them in communal areas

For more advice, check out our
Better Digital Parenting booklet

SMARTPHONES

DID YOU KNOW THAT SMARTPHONES JUMP FROM BEING THE THIRD MOST POPULAR DEVICE (49% OWNERSHIP) AMONGST 8–12 YEAR OLDS* TO MOST POPULAR AMONGST 12–14 YEAR OLDS (97% OWNERSHIP)?

*in primary schools

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

Giving your child a smartphone has in many ways become a 'rite of passage', and during the transition between primary and secondary school, smartphone ownership jumps dramatically. There are of course safety benefits in being able to contact your child at all times, particularly if they are travelling distances to school or clubs. Having said that, many of the risks covered in the Tablets and Gaming Console sections are further increased by smartphones and the mobility they provide. It means that your children have access to the online world at any time, which in turn also means the online world potentially has access to your child. It can be very easy to make contact with others (including strangers), and also to send photos or videos from the phone directly in impulsive moments, which can have serious short and long-term consequences.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

There are no age requirements for a smartphone, but it's worth remembering that if you're paying for the phone and paying the bill, you should continue to monitor and supervise its use at all times! There is no 'optimal' age at which to give a child a smartphone either, but as late as possible is better – ideally wait until your child is at least 13. It should always be a decision you make as a family, based on your child's maturity and your relationship with them. Don't succumb to peer pressure: getting a smartphone should be seen as a major responsibility and privilege, not a right.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

If you are actively involved in your child's online life, agree on clear rules and restrictions, and continue to monitor and supervise regularly, you can dramatically minimise the risks presented by smartphones. Following the steps below can make a huge difference.

– **Use parental control platforms** such as Google Families or Apple's Family Sharing

– **Agree clear time and content restrictions:** our research shows us that less supervision and restrictions lead to increased risk of encountering upsetting content and cyberbullying

– Not sticking to restrictions should come with **appropriate sanctions** (not always taking the device or access away!)

– **Check browser history** and homescreen regularly for new or unfamiliar apps

– **Follow all recommended age restrictions** on gaming and social media platforms. Remember that the digital age of consent is 16 in Ireland, so ongoing monitoring and discussion with your child about their online life – in an atmosphere of trust – is absolutely vital

– **Don't allow phones into bedrooms at night:** charge them in communal areas

For more advice, check out our Better Digital Parenting booklet

WEARABLES

DID YOU KNOW THAT 19% OF 8-12 YEAR OLDS WEAR A SMARTWATCH?*

*CyberSafeKids Trends & Usage Data 2024-25

Wearable technology is any device you can wear on your body that is collecting real-time data. We will focus on the most likely Christmas purchase – smartwatches.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

Parents will enjoy the obvious benefit of being able to track their child's location and keep in contact with them, without having to go down the smartphone route. There can also be other benefits like learning apps and games that can be installed on some devices. Wearables often provide user personalised guidance based on the data captured. Be aware that most fitness trackers were created for adults, so the advice and recommendations provided may not be relevant, accurate or even safe for a child. Even for adults, they can be tricky to follow. For younger users, there are concerns that fitness trackers can impact body image and self-esteem, especially if they develop an unhealthy fixation with tracking daily metrics and counting calories, and are following recommendations intended for adults.

53% of 8-12 year olds already feel that they spend too much time online. Consider if your child will be distracted by the notifications and if the availability of apps and games on their wrist could lead to an increase in screen time, especially during the school day.

For wearables with companion apps, users will be asked to provide personal information, so be aware that your child's data (name, DOB etc.) is being collected and their privacy could be impacted. In signing up, you should be providing permission for your child's data to be collected if they are under the age of 16 (the digital age of consent in Ireland). There is also a risk that third parties could access your child's data without your consent if it is not securely uploaded and stored. As with any devices that enable online communication, there are safety risks, so you will want to limit contact with people they do not know or need to share information with, including online communities that may share fitness tracking information.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

Most wearables are designed for adults but it is possible to find ones designed for children. The manufacturers will provide a recommended age, e.g. Google's Fitbit Ace is recommended for ages 8+.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

Smartwatches can provide peace of mind for many parents but you need to choose the right device and take time to set it up too. Always:

– Try to get a device designed for children and take time to read some **reviews** and **recommendations**

– Consider what you want to get from this device – both you and your child. If your child wants a fitness tracker then take some time to chat about why

– Make sure you look into what data the device collects and how it may be used, shared and secured. Limit the amount of sharing with third parties

– Use parental controls to manage privacy, access to apps, contact risks and secure devices by using strong passwords. Also keep track of the device so it doesn't fall into the wrong hands!

– Use the school time setting where available (**Apple Smartwatch**, **Google Fitbit Ace**)

HEADSETS, EARPHONE & DRONES

DID YOU KNOW THAT 85 DECIBELS (ABOUT THE NOISE OF A FOOD BLENDER) IS THE MAXIMUM RECOMMENDED VOLUME FOR A CHILD'S HEADSET?

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

Use of headsets can make it harder to monitor content and contact concerns. While children like the privacy and parents might enjoy the peace and quiet, there is a risk that even when they are in the same room as you, you aren't able to keep an ear on what is happening when your child is using a headset to stream content or chat with others. Use of in-ear buds and earphones should be discouraged for younger users. Even headsets can lead to sensitive young ears becoming damaged if the volume is too high. For children, the WHO recommends a maximum volume of 85 decibels and prolonged usage also has a part to play in hearing damage.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

There are no specific age requirements but be aware of the fact that your child's ears are still developing, so find a headset that is both durable and designed for younger ears.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

Remember that they do limit your ability to monitor their interactions and consumption of potentially upsetting or harmful content. Ensure the headset is paired with devices that you control and monitor. Find a child-friendly headset that is durable, comfortable to wear, adjustable and has volume limitations. You should also set clear time restrictions for when they are used, and for how long. It is also worth checking online for recommendations.

*A NOTE ON DRONES

Drones have become increasingly popular and accessible and these devices – essentially remote-control toy helicopters with fitted cameras – are very manoeuvrable and can be great fun. As with any smart devices, however, they can store an owner's personal and financial information, and although simpler versions for younger children are available, most drones have a recommended age of 12+.

It's essential to teach your child how to fly them responsibly and they should have sufficient maturity and training to do so before being allowed to fly alone. Children should understand the importance of not violating others' privacy and remember that there are strict restrictions on where and when drones can be used safely. Use an app like Open Sky to better map where these areas are.

IMMERSIVE TECH

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE MOST COMMON IMMERSIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR CHILDREN TO OWN IS A VR HEADSET, WITH 11% OWNERSHIP AMONGST IRISH 8-12 YEAR OLDS?

While immersive technologies can include 'Augmented Reality' (AR) with its blend of real and virtual, or fully immersive 'Virtual Reality' (VR), which replaces a user's surroundings with a 3D digital environment or haptics that extend to other senses, we will focus on your most likely purchase here – a VR headset.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

The opportunities VR presents for learning and having fun are endless, but children already find it hard to switch off games/apps and using this immersive technology may make it harder to switch off and re-engage in the physical world. Remember that children and young people are still developing their impulse control!

There are also concerns about prolonged usage in younger children affecting eyesight and coordination during key stages of their development. Even older users sometimes report dizziness and other physical symptoms. Some users wear headsets for long periods – to stream content like movies and videos to their device for private consumption – and that can also make it difficult for parents to monitor what kinds of things they may be exposed to.

Social interactions like gaming or attending concerts and events can be truly amazing in an immersive environment, particularly if it is impossible to do so in-person. However the near-reality presented makes any harm experienced more impactful, especially if you consider that a child could possibly interact with an online predator, experience cyberbullying or even be virtually assaulted in a 3D immersive world.
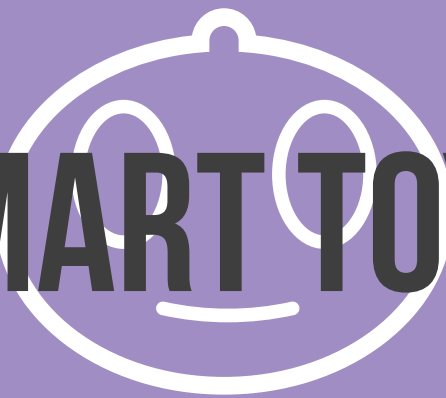
WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

Age guidance is provided by some manufacturers. For example, Quest headsets are not recommended for those under 10 years old and there are additional parental controls for users under 13. Age guidance needs to encompass more than the device itself but what it is being used for, i.e. what apps or games are being accessed and what communication will be allowed, and the accompanying risks.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

As with all other devices, you need to establish clear, pre-agreed rules in your home and continue to regularly monitor and supervise your child's use.

– Remember, with this kind of technology you need to consider physical safety, as well as safety online. Find a 'safe play' area within your home where your child can engage their VR headset

– Start with manufacturer guidelines and follow safety and set-up advice, e.g., PS VR, Valve Index, Meta Quest

– Consider your child's stage of development and set time limits to reduce prolonged exposure

– Find settings to protect privacy and limit interactions with strangers, and where possible, set physical boundaries within some environments to limit physical interactions with your child's avatar, i.e. virtual touching. Horizon Worlds has this ability but was originally designed for users over 18

– Assess games, apps, or services children want to use and check first whether the content is age-appropriate

SMART TOYS

DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS WITH ANY TOY THAT HAS CAMERAS OR MICROPHONES, STORES DATA AND LOCATION AND HAS INTERNET CONNECTIVITY?

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS?

'Smart toys', such as robots, voice-activated dolls and augmented reality toys use sensors, microphones, cameras and internet connectivity to make play more interactive for children. The right smart toys can provide great opportunities for learning: your child could be improving their critical thinking skills or learning to code, but your child's interest in some toys may be short-lived, particularly if the toy is driving the interactions rather than the child. Importantly, smart toys should not be considered a substitute for human interaction when it comes to building social skills, especially when used by very young children. Research has shown they can slow social development and limit opportunities for parents to engage and be the teacher.

There are major privacy and security concerns to consider because these toys collect personal information like names, voices, location or in some cases, even medical information. Data collected may be shared or used by the manufacturer to track children's behaviour and habitual engagements. There is potential for your child's data to be exposed to hackers and some manufacturers fail to encrypt the data traffic when transferred. If the toy is connected to the internet, remote access may also be possible and could open your home up to surveillance, or expose your child to harmful contact. Our research tells us that 26% of 8-12 year olds find it hard to switch off games and apps, and the use of smart toys may provide a further distraction and allow less time for interacting person to person.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

This obviously differs vastly from toy to toy, and manufacturers will usually indicate a minimum recommended age for use – with 3+ normally the lowest age indicated for a smart toy – given basic safety concerns.

WILL MY CHILD BE SAFE?

It is wise to do your research before buying a smart toy. Learn about the features and ensure it is age-appropriate. You can find out more about end users' experiences by reading online reviews.

You should also:

– **Take the time to read the privacy policy** and find out what data the manufacturer collects, how it is secured and how it may be shared or used. As the digital age of consent in Ireland is set at 16, you will need to authorise the collection and processing of your child's personal data if they are under 16. Learn more at the hyperlink about protecting your child's data

– **Familiarise yourself with security features**, set strong passwords, limit location sharing and talk to your child about safety concerns. You should also use parental controls where available to increase privacy and monitor your child's usage

– Remember to **keep the software up to date**: set these updates to 'automatic'

– **Only allow use of these toys in communal areas** – especially those with in-built cameras – and not in private spaces (e.g. bedrooms)

– **Limit usage time** to allow for plenty of person to person interactive play and learning

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