eSafetyresearch

It's more than fun and games

The online gaming experiences of children and young people with disability

July 2025

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Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgement of Country

eSafety acknowledges all First Nations peoples for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses – land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations peoples, and to Elders past and present.
We acknowledge the disproportionate representation of children and young people with disability among Australia's First Nations peoples.

Contents

Content warning

This report discusses bullying, suicide and other material that some people may find distressing. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time. If you or someone you know is at risk of immediate harm, please call Triple Zero (000).
For counselling and support, please contact:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or **text**

13YARN: 13 92 76

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

1800 Respect: 1800 737 732

Qlife: 1800 184 527

Key terms

A note on terminology

The disability community has largely recognised and used inclusive language and terminology for decades. Person-first language includes 'person with disability', and identity-first language includes 'disabled person'. In this report, we primarily use person-first language. We understand that many people with disability choose to use identity-first language.

We have also used terms that are meaningful to a wide range of people while recognising that these terms may not always reflect the experiences of all people with disability.

While these definitions of disability focus on the challenges a person may experience, we acknowledge that disability is multifaceted and brings a wide array of unique experiences that can holistically shape a person's unique strengths and perspectives.

These definitions should be understood within the context of systemic issues and barriers that children and young people with disability face; that they are not disabled by their state of body, but rather by attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that discriminate against them.

For the purposes of this report, key terms are defined as follows:

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. A neurodevelopmental disability that can cause people to experience issues with concentration, overactivity and impulse control.

Autism: A neurodevelopmental disability that impacts how people communicate, interact with others and make sense of the world. People with autism may face barriers to social communication and interaction in settings designed by and for the neurotypical majority. They may also have sensory sensitivities or repetitive or restrictive patterns of behaviour or interests.

Bullying-type behaviours: A range of behaviours that were described in our survey as 'hurtful' or 'upsetting', such as leaving people out on purpose or sending 'nasty' or 'hurtful' messages.

Children and young people: People aged 8–17.

Griefing: When gamers do things or make comments to annoy other players on purpose. It is a gaming-specific form of trolling.

Grooming: When abusers build up trust with children or young people so they can harm them sexually. When this happens online, they usually want to persuade the child or young person into sexual conversations or activities, such as sending sexual images or videos, or getting sexual in a live chat or video call. They may also arrange to meet the child or young person and harm them physically.

Neurodevelopmental or developmental disability: A condition that develops during the first 18 years of life and impacts a person's ability to function in social, academic, personal or occupational settings, which are all largely designed for and dominated by the neurotypical majority. Examples include autism, ADHD, intellectual disability and learning disability.

Neurodivergent: A person whose brain processes information in a way that is different from what society may deem typical. The term includes people who have autism, ADHD, dyslexia or dysgraphia. Many neurodivergent people don't see neurodivergence as a disability but, rather, as a specific way of seeing and interacting with the world.

Online game: A video game played online. We also use the term 'game' to refer to online games, and 'gaming' to refer to playing online games.

Parents and caregivers: Parents, carers, guardians, co-parents, or any other adult with parent-like responsibilities for a child.

Trolling: When someone posts or comments online to deliberately provoke an argument or emotional reaction.

Young gamers: Young people aged 8–17 who have played online games at any time in the past year, on any device, as described in our survey. In addition, we use the term 'child gamer' to refer to a gamer who is aged 8–12, and 'teen gamer' to refer to a gamer who is aged 13–17.

Young gamers with disability: People aged 8–17 who are young gamers (as defined above) and (as asked in our survey) who had lived with any disability or any restriction to their everyday activities that had lasted, or was likely to last, for at least six months.

About this report

The world of online gaming is a digital playground for children and young people with disability, a place where they go to have fun, relax, connect and use their imaginations. Online gaming can be a great leveller for children and young people with disability – it's a space where they have the freedom to explore – and the agency to choose – how to define themselves. Yet, online gaming is also a place where young gamers with disability can face exclusion and discrimination and may encounter harmful content and conduct at the hands of other players.

This report explores the online gaming experiences in Australia of children and young people with disability aged 8–17. It finds that many of the benefits associated with gaming are more pronounced for young gamers with disability than for their peers. However, the risks of online gaming are also more prevalent, with young gamers with disability more likely to have negative experiences such as bullying and exposure to ideas and content associated with harm.

During August and September 2023, eSafety conducted a mixed-methods study into the online gaming experiences of over 2,000 children and young people aged 8–17 in Australia. The study examined their perspectives on online gaming, the risks and benefits they experience while gaming online and the safety practices they adopt.

Following on from 'Levelling up to stay safe', our report examining online gaming across the total population of young people, this report focuses on the cohort of 276 young gamers with disability within our study. It provides a comparative analysis of the experiences of young gamers with disability and those without, finding that there are many similarities between these two groups as well as significant differences. Understanding these differences can help in the design of safer spaces for young people with disability to enable them to better enjoy the benefits of online gameplay.

The findings in this report will inform eSafety's ongoing online safety programs and resources and contribute to the Australian evidence base on the online lives of children and young people with disability.

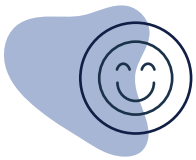
'It's more than fun and games' begins with an exploration of why young gamers with disability play online games, which games they play and who they play with. It details their positive gaming experiences, including the benefits they feel they derive from gaming online. The report then examines the negative gaming experiences and the online safety practices of young gamers with disability. It concludes by suggesting that there is scope for further work to be done to improve safety, inclusion and accessibility in games. Such improvements would better empower young people with disability to enjoy the benefits of gaming while navigating its risks.

Key findings

Young gamers with disability play online games to have fun, to be creative, and to explore other worlds and identities.

In our survey, the top motivations for playing games among young gamers with disability were to have fun (78%), to relieve boredom (68%) and to relax (60%). Young gamers with disability were more likely than those without disability to say they played games to relax (60%, compared to 53%), make or build things (53%, compared to 39%), or to use their imagination (43%, compared to 33%).

Other reasons for gaming that were more pronounced for young gamers with disability related to the freedom and agency that online gaming afforded them. They played games to do things they can't or aren't allowed to do in real life (22%, compared to 13%), to be someone else or in another world for a while (22%, compared to 11%), or to show their real selves (13%, compared to 6%).



Young people with disability are highly engaged in the world of online gaming.

Nine in 10 (90%) young people with disability had played online games in the past year. They mostly played the same games as those without disability. Minecraft was especially popular, played by 62% of young gamers with disability, compared with 51% of gamers without disability.

Approximately 2 in 5 (42%) young gamers with disability spent more than 12 hours a week playing online games. This was significantly higher than for those without disability (32%).

Gaming is often a positive, social experience for young gamers with disability.

More than 3 in 5 (63%) young gamers with disability felt gaming helped them with social connection. This beneficial aspect of gaming is reflected in their levels of social gaming and communication with others while gaming. Three-quarters (76%) of young gamers with disability had played games with others online in the past year. Over 3 in 5 (64%) had gamed alongside others in person.

Nine in 10 (89%) played with people they knew in real life, such as family or friends, and 2 in 5 (42%) played with people they didn't know in real life. It was typical for young gamers with disability to communicate online with others while playing. Two-thirds (66%) said they talked to or messaged people online while gaming.

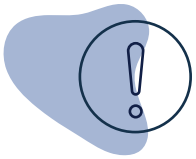
In the past year, 7 in 10 (70%) young gamers with disability had interacted positively with other players while gaming. Positive interactions included helping, supporting or standing up for others. It was also common (62%) for them to have been helped or supported by other players.

The vast majority (93%) of young gamers with disability associated online gaming with positive feelings, especially happiness, calmness/relaxation and excitement. Four in 5 (79%) young gamers with disability reported that gaming had helped them to develop skills, while over half (54%) felt it provided emotional benefits.

Experiences of bullying and griefing are common among young gamers with disability.

Just over 2 in 5 (41%) of the young gamers with disability had been the target of bullying-type behaviour in the past year while gaming, more than for those without disability (30%). The most common of these behaviours was exclusion – over a quarter of young gamers with disability (26%) had experienced being left out on purpose by another player. This was close to double the rate of those without disability (14%). One-third (33%) experienced griefing, compared with less than a quarter (23%) of young gamers without disability.

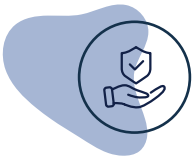
Over a quarter (27%) of young gamers with disability admitted they had used at least one type of bullying-type behaviour themselves in the past year.



Young gamers with disability are more likely to be exposed to content and ideas associated with harm, online hate and grooming-type behaviour.

Around 2 in 5 (41%) teen gamers with disability reported they had encountered at least one form of content and ideas associated with harm (e.g. misogynistic ideas, violent content) in the past year while gaming. This figure was higher than for those without disability (30%). Around 1 in 10 (9%) young gamers with disability had been the target of online hate in the past year, compared with 6% of those without disability.

Around 1 in 10 (11%) young gamers with disability experienced another player doing something that made them feel uncomfortable – for example, if someone asked them personal questions, or was too friendly, or asked them to keep secrets. These types of interactions could be indicative of, or a precursor to, online grooming. The number was higher than for those without disability (6%). Almost 1 in 10 (9%) gamers with disability said they had received or been asked to send nude pictures, videos or sexual information while gaming. This number was higher than for those without disability (6%).



Most young gamers with disability are taking steps to game safely.

Over 9 in 10 (93%) young gamers with disability said they usually put in place at least one safety practice while gaming. Typical steps included not sharing personal information (54%), limiting who they played or communicated with (70%), and limiting their use of communication features (55%).

Almost all young gamers with disability who experienced bullying or griefing did something in response. Nine in 10 (92%) responded to their experience of bullying, and 88% responded to their experience of griefing. Responses included taking action to try to stop it or seeking support. However, smaller numbers of young gamers with disability formally reported their experiences of bullying or griefing (36% and 21%, respectively).

In the words of children and young people[1]

Young gamers with disability play games online for fun, relaxation and connection, and to do things they can't otherwise do. They say gaming makes them feel...

> Happy. I don't have a lot of friends irl, so playing with other gamers makes me happy.''
>
> (Girl, 16)

> Like I belong somewhere. I can be someone else like in role-playing games and explore.''
>
> (Boy, 15)

> I feel like I belong. I have autism, so online people just don't know. I can be so relaxed and have fun without being judged.''
>
> (Boy, 15)

> Makes me feel part of a team and I like the games I play. It's very relaxing to me.''
>
> (Boy, 9)

> Good. It's a break from things.''
>
> (Girl, 16)

> Happy. It helps me pass [the] time and distracts my head from my depression. It's enjoyable.''
>
> (Non-binary young person, 16)

> Free to explore different worlds.''
>
> (Girl, 14)

[1] All quotes in this section are drawn from the free text responses of 276 young gamers with disability to two of the open-ended questions in our survey. The quotes have been lightly edited for punctuation and grammar. These questions asked young people how they feel about online gaming and what they want adults to understand about it.

They want to address adults' concerns about gaming and want them to understand...

> [I]t's not just a game. It helps you leave reality and become a part of a world and community that isn't all doom and gloom like real life."
> (Boy, 14)

> That this is the way kids talk to each other and how we hang out."
> (Girl, 14)

> Not everyone is a creep and not everything about video games is negative."
> (Boy, 17)

> That I listen to what they say about being safe and I can be trusted."
> (Girl, 14)

> I would want parents to understand that video games make me feel more happy and I want them to feel happy by playing with me."
> (Girl, 10)

> It's so much fun. [It] helps me have something in common with my friends."
> (Boy, 11)

> It's fun and you can build different things."
> (Girl, 8)

> [I]t's not just about playing games. It's a way to escape from reality with how bad the world is and how cruel people can be."
> (Non-binary young person, 17)

> It helps to calm me with my autism."
> (Girl, 8)

Methodology

In September 2023, we conducted a 20-minute online survey with a nationally representative sample of young people in Australia aged 8–17 and their parents and caregivers. A total of 2,024 young people participated in the survey, including 1,799 who had played online games in the past year.

The survey was undertaken as part of a mixed-methods study on young people's experiences of online gaming. Findings of the study are reported in our main gaming report (eSafety Commissioner, 2024a), and details of the study methodology are in a separate report (eSafety Commissioner, 2024b).

Informed consent to participate in the survey was sought from both parents and young people. The survey was submitted as part of the Human Research Ethics Committee approval process, with ethics approval received from Bellberry Ethics Committee on 10 August 2023, ID 22CeSC084.

Sample of young gamers with disability

Participants with disability were identified via two questions asked of their parent or caregiver at the start of the survey.

- The first question asked if their child was experiencing any disability or any restriction to their everyday activities that had lasted, or was likely to last, for at least six months.
- Those who indicated that their child did have a disability or restriction were then asked to specify the type. Parents and caregivers could select more than one type of disability. These are shown in Table 1.

The questions on disability were used for quota monitoring purposes.

Of the 2,024 young people who participated in our survey, there were 307 with disability. This comprises 15% of our total sample of young people aged 8–17. This proportion is higher than the estimated prevalence of disability among children and young people in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024a).[2]

[2] Data from the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that around 7.6% of Australian children aged 0–14 and 9.3% of young people aged 15–24 had disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, as cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024a).

Table 1: Young gamers with disability, by disability type

	Number of young gamers with disability	% of young gamers with disability
Neurodevelopmental or developmental disability (e.g. autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)	154	56
Mental ill-health (e.g. depression, anxiety)	101	37
Learning disability (e.g. dyslexia)	56	20
Behavioural disorder (e.g. oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder)	51	18
Physical disability	22	8
Cognitive or intellectual disability (e.g. Down syndrome)	12	4
Hearing impaired or deaf	1	<1
A different disability or restriction	22	8
I don't know or I'm not sure / I don't want to say	13	5
Total sample of young gamers with disability	**276**	**100**

Within our sample, 276 young people with disability had played online games in the past 12 months. The range of disabilities among young gamers in our sample is shown in Table 1, and key demographic characteristics are set out in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, within our sample, boys outnumbered girls, and those with varying sexualities and sexual orientations comprised a significant minority, as did First Nations young people. This is consistent with the higher rates of disability among these groups of young people in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024b; Hill et al., 2021; Mission Australia, 2023).

Table 2: Young gamers with disability, by key demographics

	Number of young gamers with disability	% of young gamers with disability
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	31	11
Speak a language other than English at home	28	10
Girls	115	42
Boys	154	56
Non-binary	7	3
Sexually diverse*	17	17**
Aged 8–12	148	54
Aged 13–17	128	46
Total disability sample	**276**	**100**

*The survey question about sexuality was only asked of those aged 13–17, and only of those who were comfortable answering the question.

**The base for this was teen gamers with disability aged 13–17 who answered the question on sexuality.

Although this report discusses the online experiences of young gamers with disability, this group of young people is not homogenous. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, within this group there is a range of disabilities as well as other intersecting demographic characteristics (Nectoux et al., 2023; Tsatsou, 2019).

Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this report.

Limitations of our survey questions

- Young gamers with disability were identified via two questions asked of their parent or caregiver. This may have resulted in some young people with disability not being identified in the survey data. For example, a child may have had a disability their parent or caregiver wasn't aware of, such as mental ill health, or an 'invisible' disability – that is, a disability that is less apparent, acknowledged or visible than others (Bitman, 2022; Davis, 2005; Kattari et al., 2018; Mantilla, 2021).

- The use of the term 'restriction' in our survey was intended to indicate to survey participants the broad scope of the term 'disability' and to ensure that those who were undiagnosed were not excluded. However, for the purposes of future studies, we recognise that there are better ways to frame our understanding of what a disability may mean.

- The survey questions regarding disability were prepared with limited input from people with a lived experience of disability.

Limitations of our survey sampling

- Responses were drawn from an online survey which itself has accessibility limits. This may have excluded a cohort of young people with disability who cannot access surveys but do access online gaming spaces.

- The demographic composition of our sample of young gamers with disability is to be used as indicative of the survey group only and is not representative of the wider population of young Australians with disability. This is because quotas were set for the total survey sample, not for the disability sample.

- It is important to note that although the sample of n=276 gamers with disability is sufficient for comparative analysis, it is not a large sample size. This means that relatively large percentage point differences between the results for gamers with disability and the results for other gamers need to be observed to be statistically significant. Consequently, an absence of statistically significant differences between gamers with disability and other gamers does not necessarily mean there is no difference in the 'real world'.

Limitations pertaining to our study overall are detailed in our full **methodology report**.

Positionality statement

eSafety understands the impact of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation on our research and analysis. The team that authored this report is made up of queer and cis-gender women of Asian and European heritage. Identities represented in the team include parents – including parents of young people with disability. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety issues, and the lived experiences of people at risk of online harms.

Interpreting tables and figures in this report

In this report, figures provided in data tables and charts may not sum to 100% due either to rounding or to question formats that allowed multiple answers to be given. Tables and charts may not include responses such as 'prefer not to answer' or 'don't know' or similar responses if the incidence is low.

Significance testing was applied at a 95% confidence interval to compare the relevant subgroups (i.e. young gamers with disability, compared to those without disability) in the quantitative analysis. Upward arrows denote results significantly higher, and downward arrows denote results significantly lower, than comparable subgroups at a 95% confidence interval. When we refer to findings for young gamers with disability being similar to those without disability, this means there was no statistically significant difference, even if observed percentages may differ.

Analysis of the data by gender is not discussed in the report, but can be examined via supplementary tables in Appendix B.

Participation in online gaming

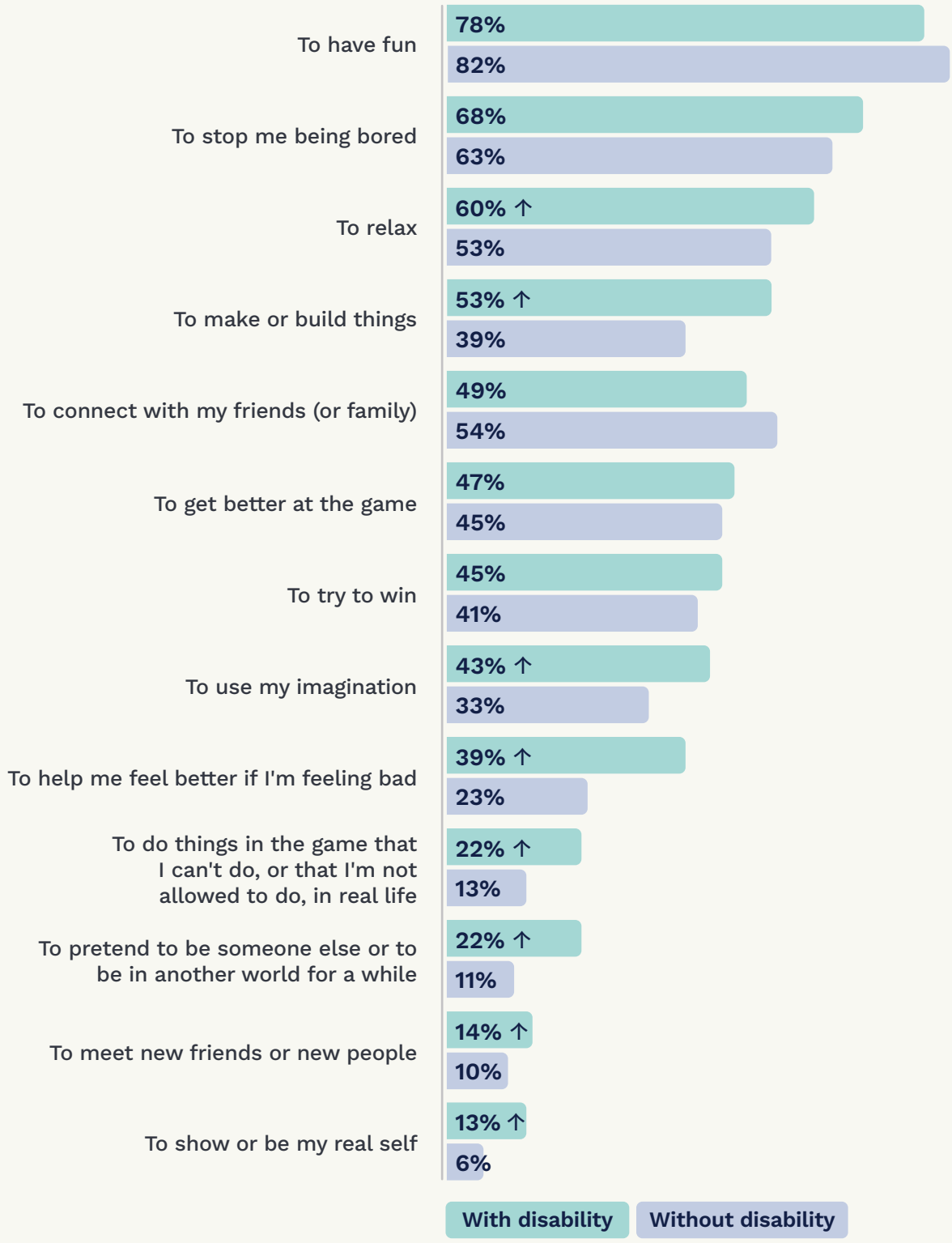
For young gamers with disability, the reasons why they play, and the online games they play, are largely the same as those of their peers without disability. However, more young gamers with disability are motivated to play games to build things, use their imagination, feel better and be free to explore another realm.

For young gamers with disability, online gaming can be a social experience, and they spend more time playing online games than young gamers without disability. Online spaces such as gaming environments provide an important channel for social inclusion and participation in digital culture for children and young people with disability (Goggin et al., 2024).

Young gamers with disability play games to have fun, relax and be creative, and to explore other worlds and identities

Of the young people with disability who participated in our survey, 9 in 10 (90%) had played online games in the past year. The top three motivations for playing games were to have fun (78%), to relieve boredom (68%) and to relax (60%). While these were consistent with gamers without disability (see Figure 1), a higher proportion of young gamers with disability said they played games to relax (60%, compared to 53% of those without disability).

Figure 1: Motivations for gaming



Q. Why do you play video games online? You can choose more than one answer.

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Making or building things and imaginative play were also important motivators for gaming among young gamers with disability.

- Over half (53%) of young gamers with disability said making or building things was a reason they played games, compared with 4 in 10 (39%) of those without disability.
- Over 2 in 5 (43%) of young gamers with disability said they played games to use their imagination, compared to a third (33%) of young gamers without disability.

Coping with negative emotion was another important reason why young gamers with disability played games. Almost 2 in 5 (39%) young gamers with disability said they played games to help them feel better if they were feeling bad, compared with around 1 in 4 (23%) young gamers without disability.

For young people with disability, the desire for autonomy and agency, and to try out different aspects of their identity, are strong motivators for gaming (Pavlopoulou et al., 2022). Online gaming can be enabling for young people with disability – through playing games, they can do things that are otherwise inaccessible to them (Cairns et al., 2021). In our survey, young gamers with disability expressed motivations for gaming that related to the freedom and agency that online gaming afforded them.

- One in 5 (22%) young gamers with disability said they played games to do things in the game that they can't do, or aren't allowed to do, in real life. This was significantly higher than for those without disability (13%).
- Those with disability were twice as likely as those without disability to play games so they could show or be their real selves (13%, compared to 6%).
- Conversely, young gamers with disability were twice as likely as those without disability to play games in order to pretend to be someone else or to be in another world for a while (22%, compared to 11%).

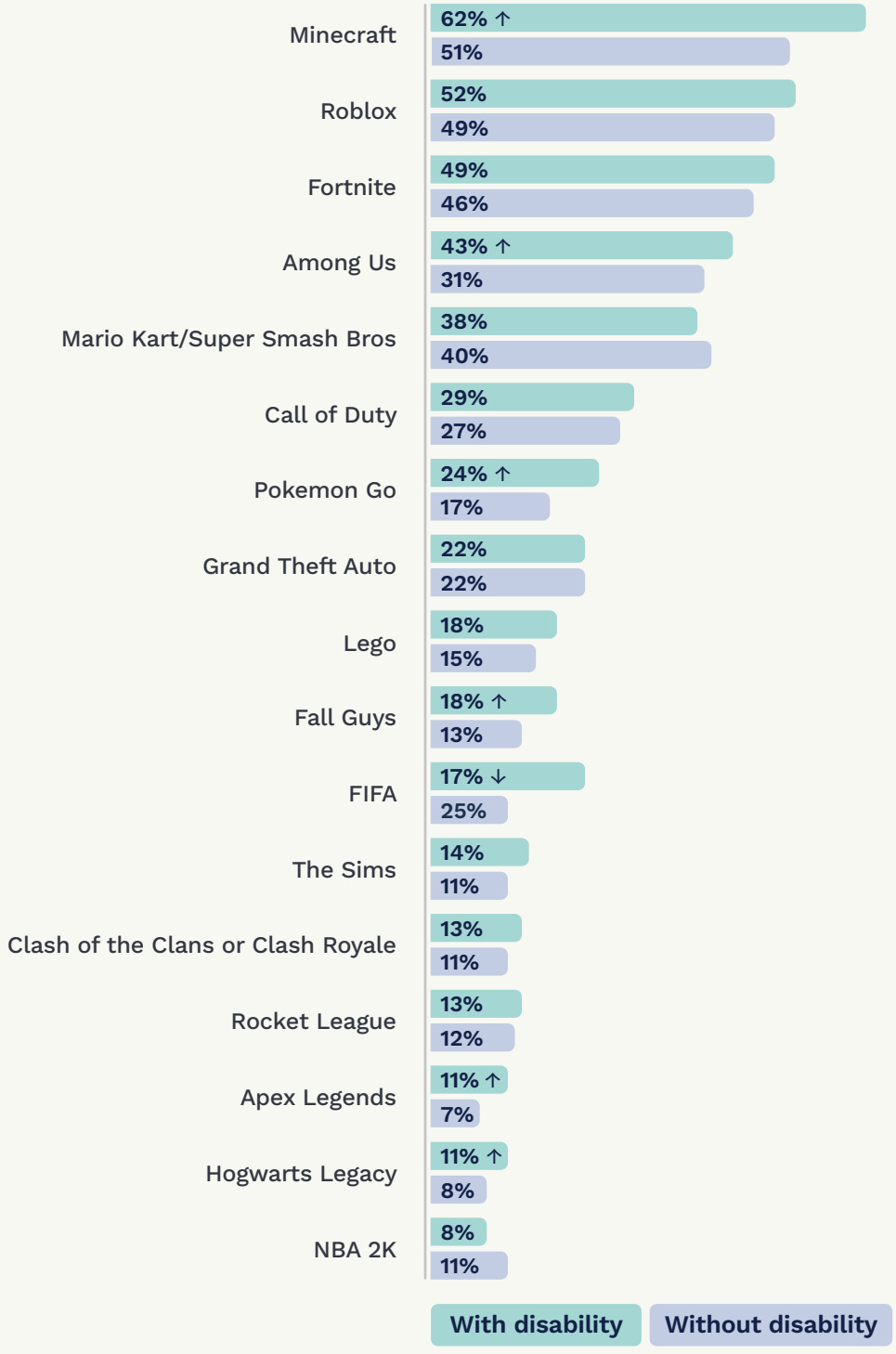
Gaming can bring about social inclusion and an equality of experience on a par with young gamers without disability – for example, the anonymity that online gaming affords can allow those with disability to reveal their identity on their own terms (Agren et al., 2020; Cairns et al., 2021; Sousa et al., 2023; Wästerfors & Hansson, 2017).

Minecraft, Roblox and Fortnite are the top three online games played by young gamers with disability

Young gamers with disability tended to favour the same online games as young people without disability, with Minecraft, Roblox and Fortnite being the most popular games regardless of disability (see Figure 2).

Minecraft was the top game played by all young gamers in our survey. It was especially popular among young gamers with disability, with 3 in 5 (62%) saying they had played the game in the past year, compared with 1 in 2 (51%) gamers without disability. Research on Minecraft and children with autism indicates that the game enables play for young people with disability who are not accommodated for in physical-world playgrounds (Ringland, 2023).

Figure 2: Online games played by young people with disability (by 10% or more of the young people surveyed)



Q. From the following list, pick all the games you have played in the past year, even if you only played them once or twice. / In the past year have you played any other video games online that are not on the list? / List all of the other games you can remember playing in the past year, even if you only played them once or twice.

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

The higher rate of playing Minecraft is consistent with several key reasons for playing games that, as discussed above, are more pronounced among young gamers with disability. These are: the desire for imaginative play, for making and building things, and for pretending to be someone else or to be in another world for a while. The open-ended nature of gameplay within Minecraft enables imaginative play, freedom to explore, and the opportunity to build or 'craft' almost anything within the game environment.

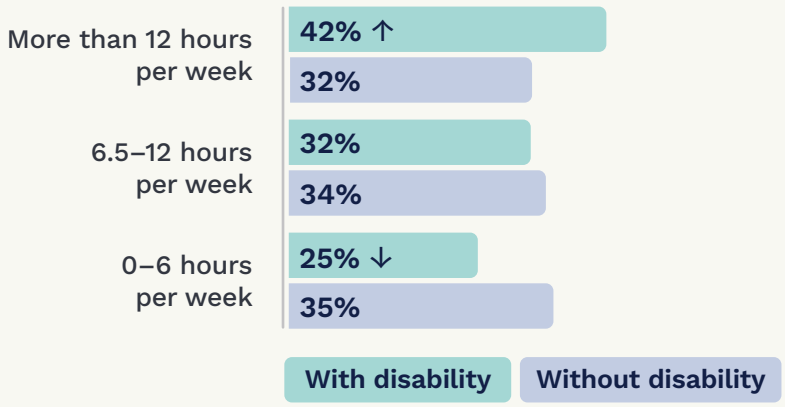
The gaming platform Roblox was the second-most popular game, played by half (52%) of young gamers with disability, closely followed by Fortnite (49%). More than 2 in 5 (43%) young gamers with disability said they had played the social deduction game Among Us in the past year, which had greater popularity within their cohort than among their peers without disability (31%). Young gamers with disability were also more likely to have played the augmented reality game Pokemon Go, as well as Fall Guys, Apex Legends and Hogwarts Legacy.

Young gamers with disability spend more time gaming

Around 2 in 5 (42%) young gamers with disability usually spent more than 12 hours a week playing online games (see Figure 3). This rate was higher than for young gamers without disability (32%).

Only a quarter (25%) of young gamers with disability said they usually play online games for 6 or fewer hours per week (compared to 35% of those without disability).

Figure 3: Hours spent per week playing online games



Q. How long do you usually spend playing video games online on each day of the week (on any device)? Think about how long you play during term time (not school holidays).

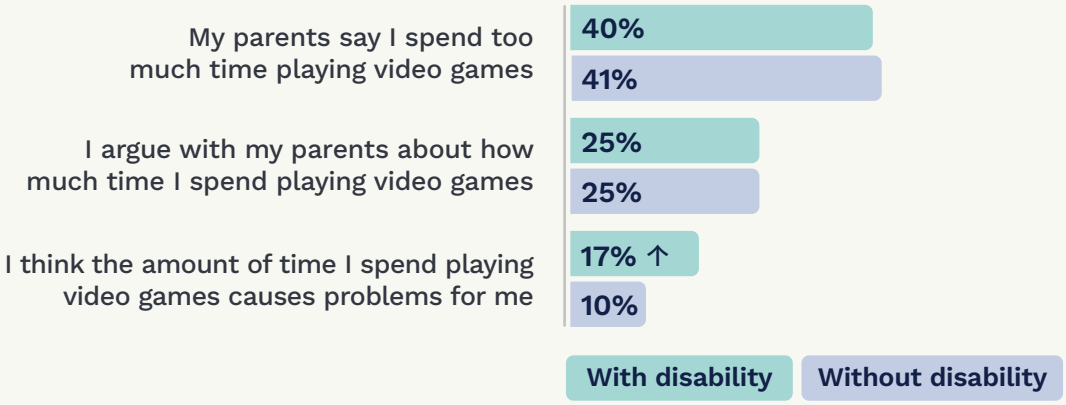
Q. How long does your child usually spend playing video games (on any device) on each day of the week during term time (not during school holidays)?

Base: Gamers aged 13–17/parents of gamers aged 8–12 who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week. 271 gamers with disability aged 8–17/their parents; 1,489 gamers without disability aged 8–17/their parents.

Many young gamers with disability have negative perceptions about the time they spend gaming online

Two in 5 (40%) young gamers with disability reported that their parents said they spend too much time gaming online, while a quarter (25%) said they argued with their parents about the time they spend gaming (see Figure 4). These rates were similar to those without disability, even though those with disability were likely to spend more hours per week playing online games.

Figure 4: Perceptions of time spent playing video games



Q. Are any of these statements true for you?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Close to 1 in 5 (17%) young gamers with disability thought that the amount of time they spent playing online games caused problems for them. This rate was significantly higher than that of young gamers without disability (10%).

Gaming is a social experience for many young gamers with disability

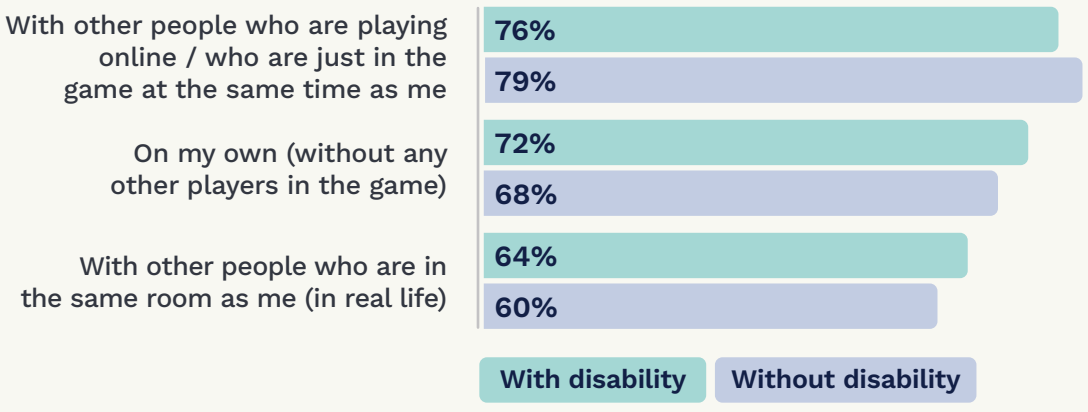
Three-quarters (76%) of young gamers with disability had played games with others online in the past year, while over 3 in 5 (64%) of the cohort said they had gamed alongside others in person (see Figure 5). These rates are consistent with those for young gamers without disability.

These levels of social play suggest that online gaming provides an important channel for social inclusion and participation in digital culture for young gamers with disability (Goggin et al., 2024).

Over half of our sample of young gamers with disability (56%) had a neurodevelopmental or developmental disability such as autism or ADHD. For neurodivergent youth, online game spaces can provide access to more comfortable play and socialisation, with many games offering opportunities to be as socially engaged as each individual player requires (Harrison et al., 2024; Meinen, 2023; Ringland, 2023; Wasserman et al., 2019).

Our survey found that the majority (72%) of young gamers with disability had played online games alone, a similar rate to those without disability (68%), which may reflect that these young people also enjoy the non-social aspects of online gaming.

Figure 5: Playing games online with others or alone



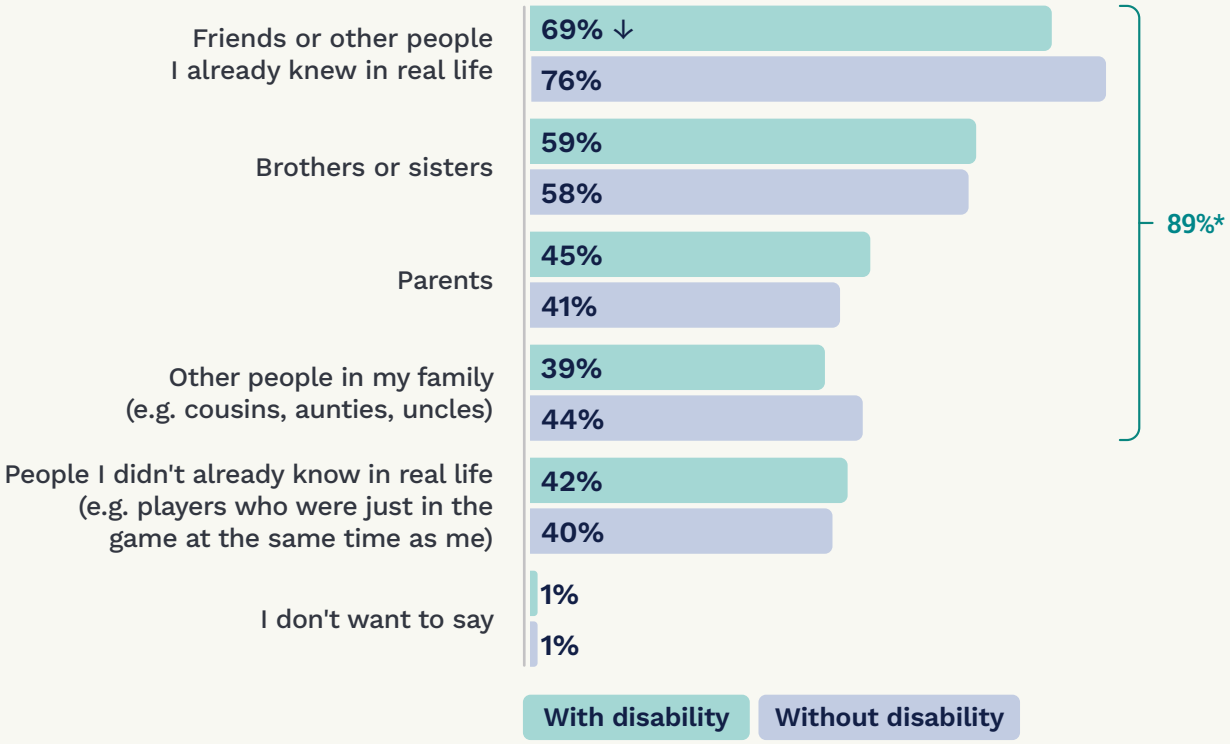
Q. In the past year, how have you played video games online?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Most young gamers with disability (89%) had played online games with people they already knew offline in the past year (see Figure 6). Specifically, 69% had played online games in the past year with friends or other people they already know in real life (non-family members). This rate was significantly lower than for young gamers without disability (76%). In addition, 6 in 10 (59%) young gamers with disability had played online games with siblings, and just under half (45%) with parents, similar to young gamers without disability.

A significant minority (42%) of young gamers with disability had played with people they didn't already know in real life, consistent with those without disability.

Figure 6: Relationship to people with whom they play online games



Q. In the past year, have you played video games online with any of the following? This could be other players in the game or in gaming forums, chat rooms or streaming platforms.

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

*Total – young gamers with disability who game with people they know offline

Direct communication with other gamers is a common part of gaming for young gamers with disability

Direct communication with others online while playing games was common among young gamers in our survey. Two-thirds (66%) of young gamers with disability said they had talked to or messaged people online while gaming, which was the same as for those without disability. Teen gamers with disability were more likely to have communicated directly with other people (see Table A2 in Appendix B).

Almost 1 in 3 (30%) young gamers with disability had talked to or messaged people they didn't already know offline while gaming. This rate was similar to those without disability (26%).

Communication with others tended to be within the game itself, although young gamers with disability did report using other channels. Just under half (45%) had used text chat in the game or console to communicate with others while gaming, while 38% used voice or video chat within the game or console (see Figure 7). Around 1 in 6 (17%) had used Discord, and the same proportion (17%) had used Messenger, while close to 1 in 7 (15%) had used social media. Other gaming-related platforms such as Steam (6%), and live streaming platforms (e.g. Twitch) (4%), were less popular. The same pattern can be seen for young gamers without disability.

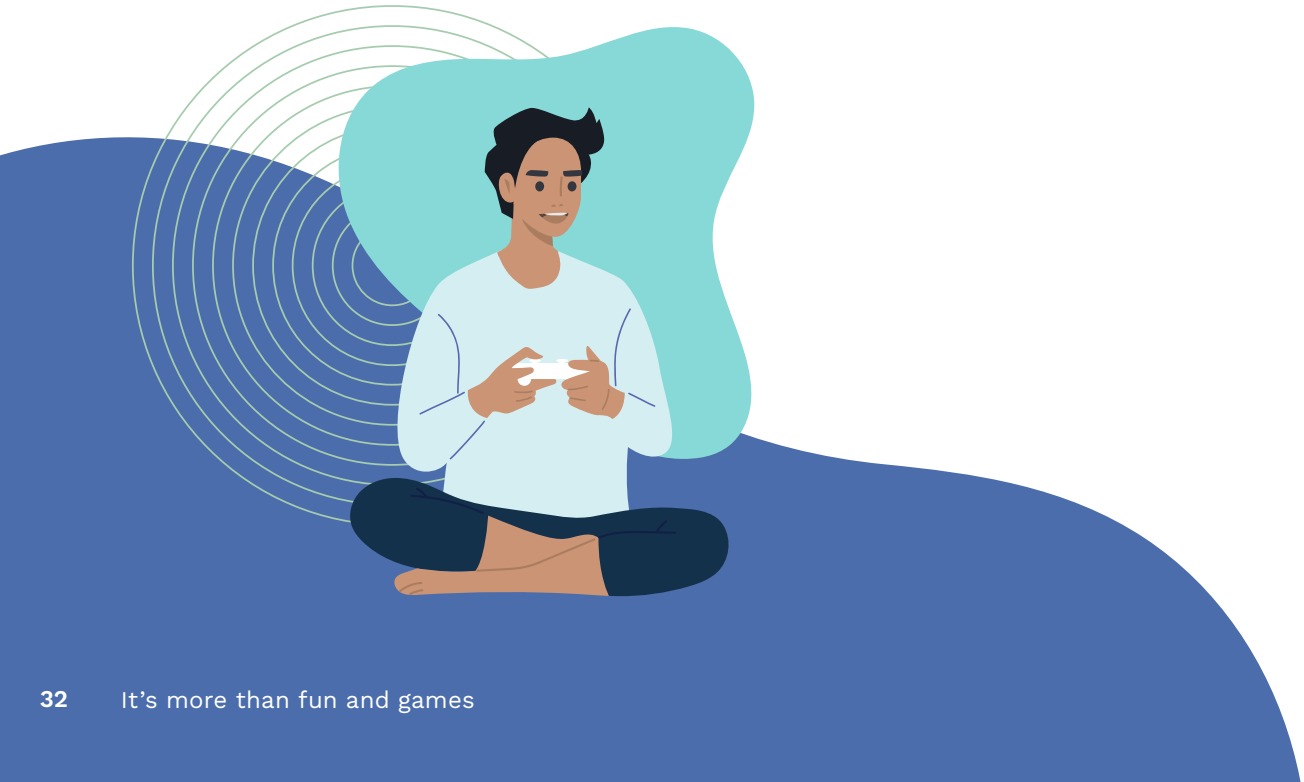
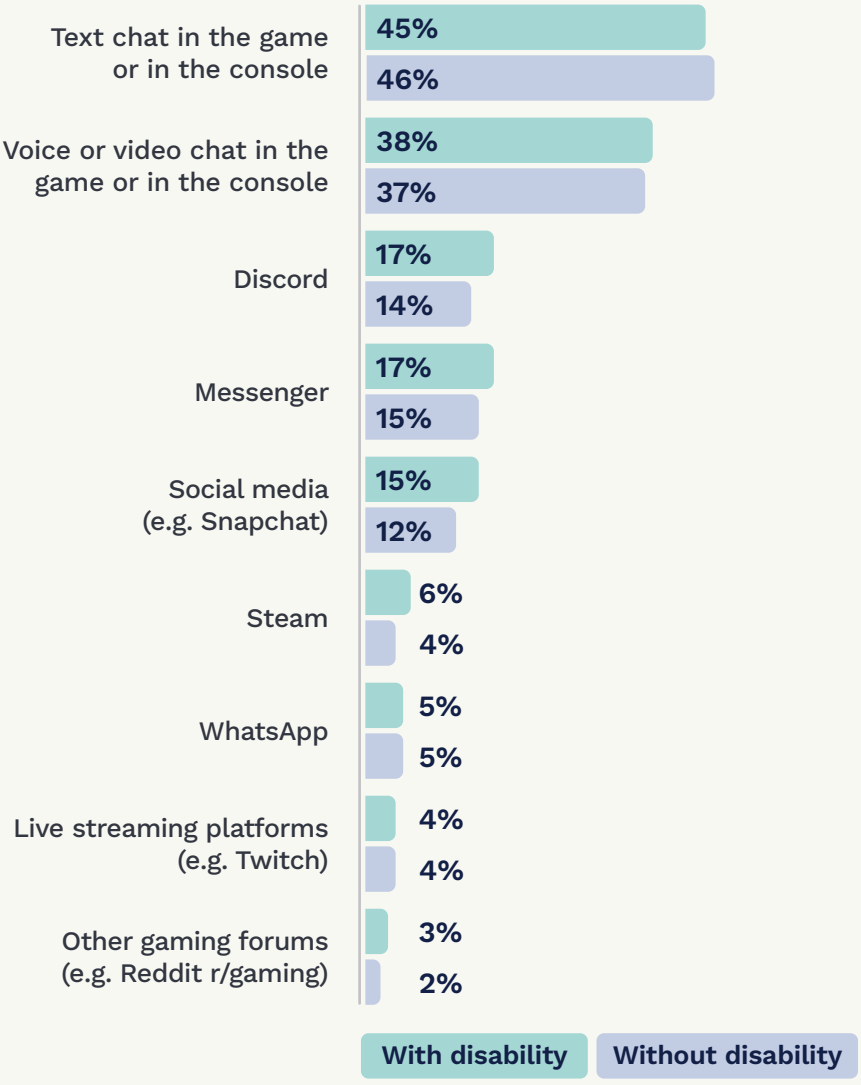


Figure 7: Platforms used to communicate with others while gaming



Q. In the past year, how did you message or talk to people while you were playing video games online? This could be as part of the game (e.g. to help each other or because you were in the same team). Or it could be in gaming forums, chat rooms or streaming platforms.

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

The positive aspects of online gaming

In an environment where young people with disability face barriers in society when attempting to connect with peers, online gaming provides an additional channel for them to experience positive interactions with others. Many young gamers with disability feel that online gaming helps them with skill development and social connection, as well as with their emotional regulation and mental health.

Most young gamers with disability have positive interactions with other gamers

Our survey found that it was common (70%) for young gamers with disability to have interacted positively with other players while gaming in the past year, such as by helping, supporting or standing up for others (see Figure 8). It was also common (62%) for them to have been the recipients of such interactions (see Figure 9). Many of these positive behaviours and experiences were more prevalent among young gamers with disability than among their peers without disability.

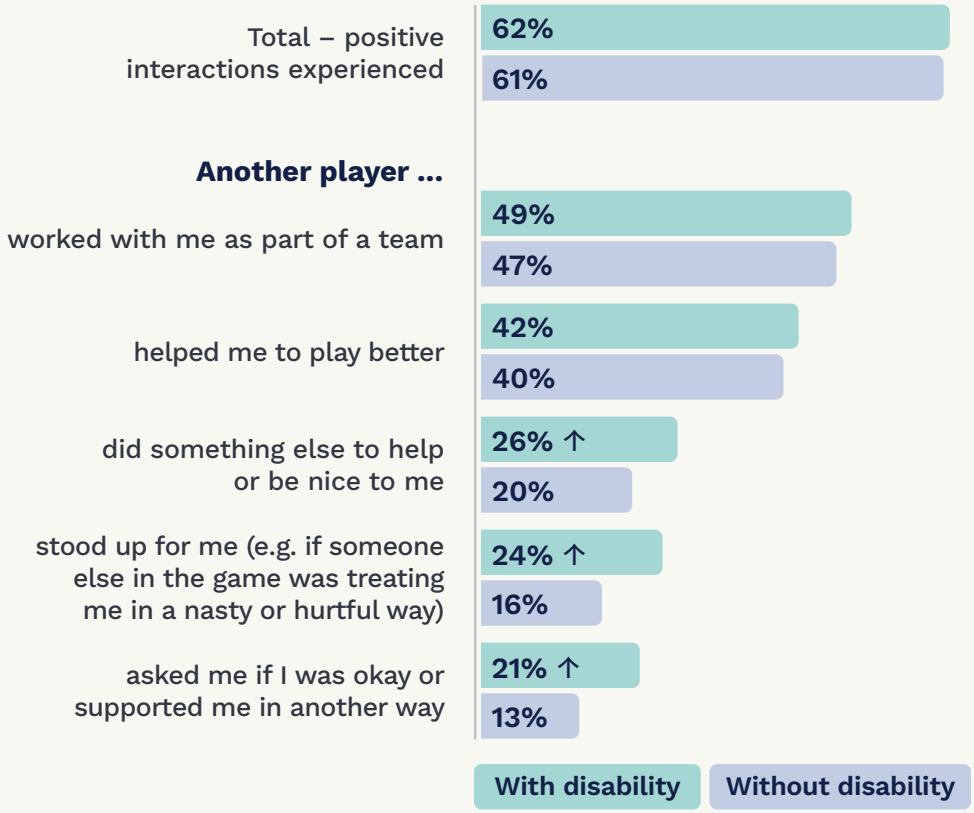
- Young gamers with disability were more likely to have engaged in upstander behaviours – standing up for or defending another player (34%, compared to 22% of those without disability), asking another player if they were okay or supporting them in another way (26%, compared to 16%), or doing something else to help or be nice to other players (31%, compared to 23%).
- Young gamers with disability were more likely to say that someone had stood up for them (24%, compared to 16% of those without disability), that someone had asked them if they were okay or had supported them in another way (21%, compared to 13%), or that someone had done something else to help or be nice to them (26%, compared to 20%).

Figure 8: Positive interactions while gaming – did themselves

Q. In the past year, have you done any of these things while you were playing video games?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Figure 9: Positive interactions while gaming – experienced



Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?

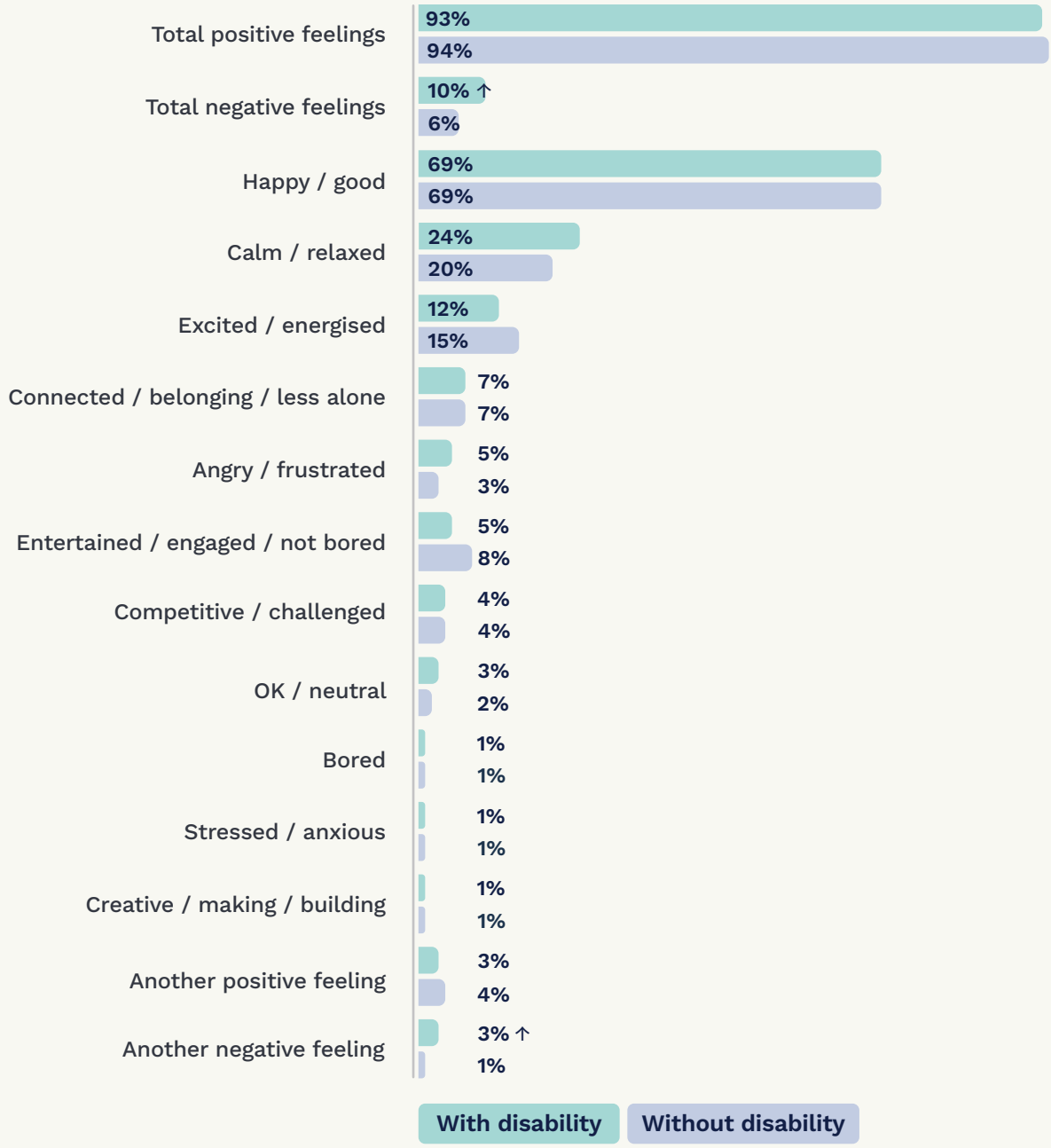
Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Most young gamers with disability feel happy or calm when gaming

In our survey, young gamers were asked how gaming makes them feel. Positive feelings were almost universal among young gamers, regardless of disability (above 90% for each cohort), as shown in Figure 10.

Almost 7 in 10 (69%) young gamers with disability said they usually felt happy, or good, or like they were having fun, while gaming. A quarter (24%) said gaming made them feel calm or relaxed. These were similar responses to those by gamers without disability (69% and 20%, respectively). While a small minority of young gamers with disability – 1 in 10 (10%) – said they usually experienced negative feelings while gaming, this was significantly higher than for those without disability (6%). Experiencing negative emotions while gaming may not necessarily be bad for young people. The gaming environment can provide opportunities for digital play that enable young people to experience negative emotions and to build the resilience and skills to deal with them (UNICEF, 2024).

Figure 10: Feelings experienced while gaming



Q. How does playing video games online usually make you feel? What colour matches that feeling? Why? (Free text response)

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Most young gamers with disability feel that gaming online has helped them in a range of ways

Close to 4 in 5 (79%) young gamers with disability stated that gaming had helped them to develop skills, as shown in Table 3. Young gamers with disability were more likely to say that gaming had helped them with specific skills, as shown in Figure 11. They were more likely to state that gaming online helped them to become better at using digital technology (52%, compared to 44% of those without disability) and at solving problems (45%, compared to 38%).

Table 3: Perceived benefits of gaming – combined

Benefits (combined)	With disability	Without disability
Skill development	79%	75%
Social connection	63% ↑	56%
Emotional benefits	54% ↑	38%

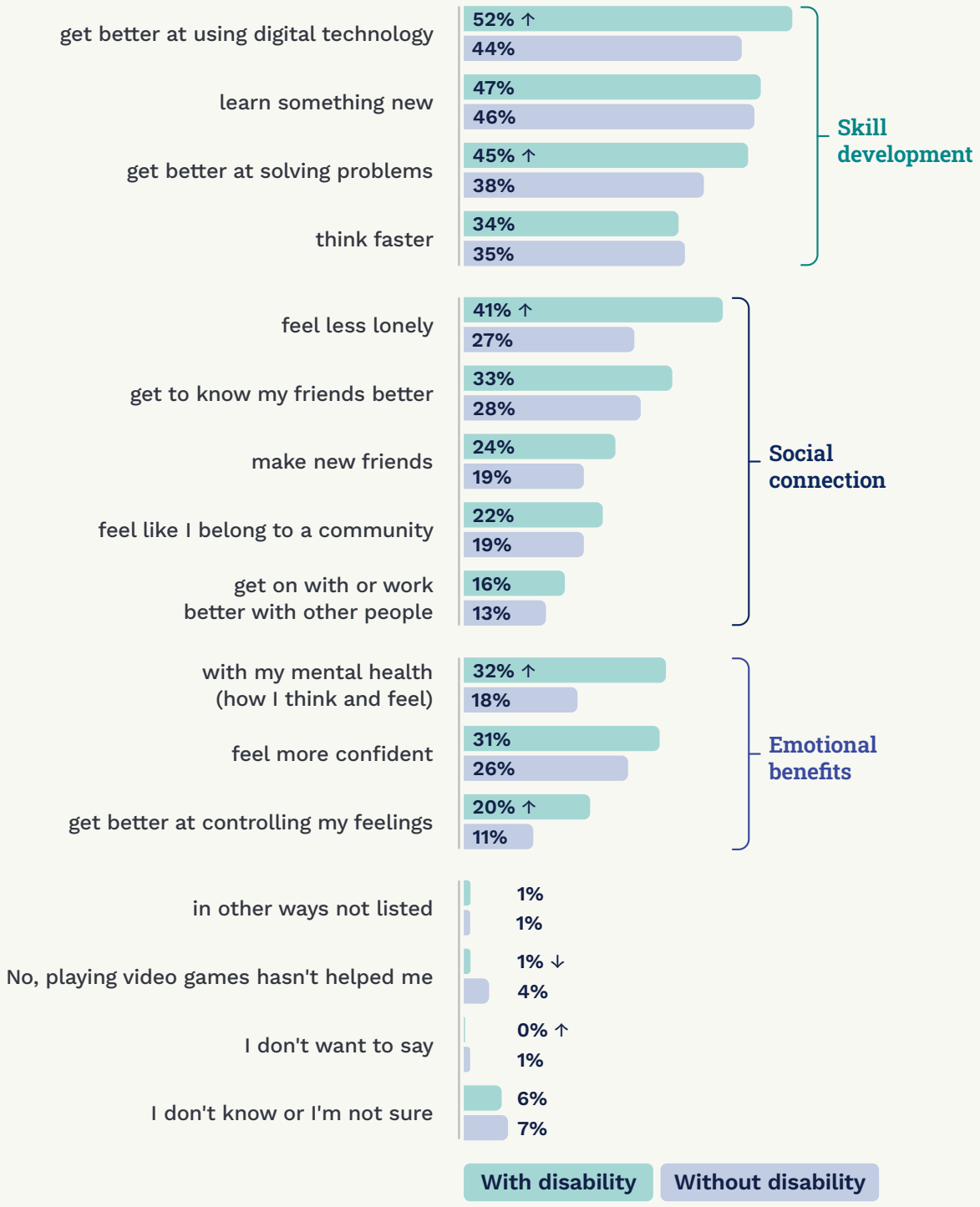
Q. Has playing video games online helped you in any of these ways or not?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Social connection was seen as a benefit of gaming by 3 in 5 (63%) young gamers with disability, which was significantly higher than for those without disability (56%). In particular, 2 in 5 (41%) young people with disability said that playing games online had helped them to feel less lonely, more so than for those without disability (27%), as shown in Figure 11. Benefiting from social connection through online gaming is particularly important for young people with disability, given that they are more likely to experience social isolation than those without disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024a).[3] Our findings on social connection as an important benefit of online gaming for young people with disability are broadly consistent with recent research (UNICEF, 2024).

[3] One in 5 (21%) people aged 15–24 with disability experienced social isolation, compared to 12% without disability: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024a), based on data derived from the 2021 *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey*, University of Melbourne.

Figure 11: Perceived benefits of gaming – specific benefits



Q. Has playing video games online helped you in any of these ways or not?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Just over half (54%) of young gamers with disability in our survey said that gaming had emotional benefits for them, compared to 2 in 5 (38%) of those without disability, as shown in Table 3. They said that gaming helped with their mental health (32%) and with getting better at controlling their feelings (20%) — more so than for those without disability (18% and 11%, respectively). Digital play within a gaming environment can provide a vital means of self-regulation for young people living with disabilities (UNICEF, 2024).

More time spent gaming online is associated with positive interactions and perceived benefits

Young gamers with disability who game more heavily (for more than 12 hours per week) are more likely to have experienced positive interactions and to feel that gaming benefits them, than those who game for fewer hours (see Tables A4 and A5 in Appendix B).

Navigating risks while gaming online

While the online gaming environment offers young gamers with disability positive experiences, playing games can also expose them to negative behaviour and potentially harmful content at the hands of other players.

Around 2 in 5 young gamers with disability experience bullying-type behaviour

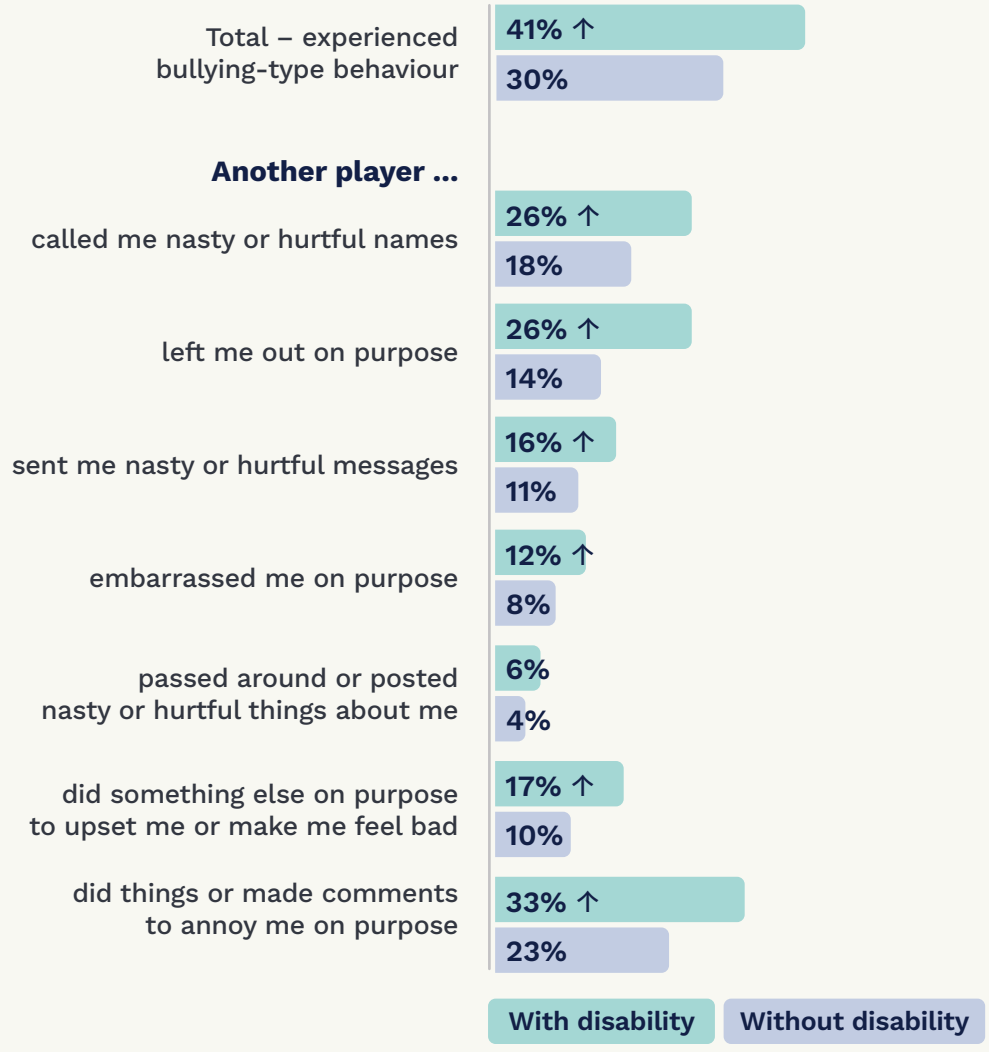
Young gamers with disability were far more likely than young gamers without disability to have been the targets of bullying-type behaviour while playing online games in the past year (41%, compared to 30%) (see Figure 12). The most common bullying-type experiences were being called nasty or hurtful names and being left out on purpose by another player. More than a quarter (26%) of young gamers with disability experienced one or other of these behaviours. The latter was experienced at close to double the rate experienced by young gamers without disability (14%).

Young gamers with disability were also significantly more likely than young gamers without disability to have been targeted with other kinds of bullying behaviours. They were more likely to have experienced another player sending them nasty or hurtful messages (16%, compared to 11%), doing something else on purpose to upset them or make them feel bad (17%, compared to 10%), or embarrassing them on purpose (12%, compared to 8%).

Experiences of griefing were also more prevalent among young gamers with disability. A third of young gamers with disability (33%) had experienced griefing, compared to less than a quarter (23%) of young gamers without disability.

Our findings are broadly consistent with other research on bullying, which has found that young people with disability have an increased likelihood of being bullied (Agren et al., 2020; Alper & Goggin, 2017; Augustine et al., 2022). Many studies have found that children on the autism spectrum are at higher risk of bullying and cyberbullying (Alper, 2023). Differences between neurotypical and neurodivergent young people in understanding and interpreting social relationships, such as differences in reading social cues, may help to explain why young people with disability are more likely to be bullied (Alper & Goggin, 2017; Augustine et al., 2022).

Figure 12: Bullying-type experiences – griefing while gaming



Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?

Q. In the past year, did another player do any of these things to you while you were playing video games online?

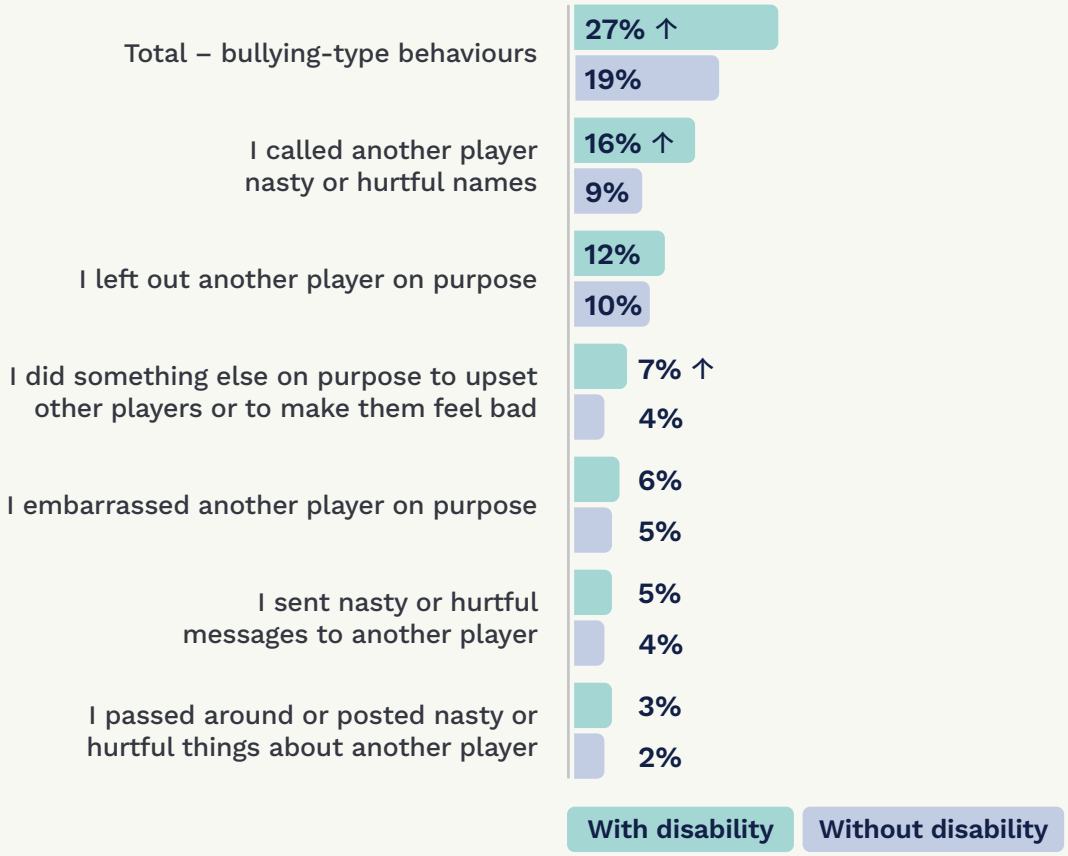
Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Young gamers with disability are more likely to recognise they had engaged in bullying-type behaviour

We asked young gamers whether they had behaved in ways that could be characterised as bullying, referred to as 'bullying-type' behaviour. Close to a quarter (27%) of young gamers with disability said they had engaged in at least one type of bullying-type behaviour while gaming in the past year (see Figure 13), compared to 19% of those without disability. Most commonly, they said they had called another player nasty or hurtful names (16%, compared to 9% of those without disability). The next most common behaviour was leaving out another player (12%), which was a similar rate to those without disability (10%). They also admitted to having done something else on purpose to upset other players or make them feel bad (7%, compared to 4% of those without disability).

While we didn't ask about the context, it may be that these behaviours were in response to other bullying-type behaviours, as young gamers with disability were targeted more and were also more likely to stand up for others. As shown in Table 4, around a third (32%) of young gamers with disability who experienced bullying responded by doing the same thing or something similar back in defence. It could also be that the higher rates of admitting to bullying-type behaviour reflect greater self-awareness of their behaviours, or a greater readiness to admit to these behaviours, among those with disability.

Figure 13: Recognising they had engaged in bullying-type behaviour



Q. In the past year, have you done any of these things while you were playing video games? This could be as part of the game or in gaming forums, chat rooms or streaming platforms. You can choose more than one answer.

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

Taking direct action in response to bullying-type behaviour and griefing is common among young gamers with disability, while reporting it is far less prevalent

The vast majority of young gamers with disability in our survey who were targeted by bullying-type behaviours or griefing said they did something in response (92% in response to bullying, 88% in response to griefing – see Table 4).[4]

- Trying to stop it directly was the most prevalent response (75% in response to bullying, 64% in response to griefing). The most common form of direct action taken was blocking or unfriending the person who did it (44% in response to bullying, 47% in response to griefing), with young gamers with disability more likely to block or unfriend in response to griefing than were those without disability (27%).
- Support seeking was common among young gamers with disability who had experienced bullying or griefing (65% in response to bullying, 53% in response to griefing). They sought support from their parents and caregivers (57% in response to bullying, 45% in response to griefing), with young gamers with disability more likely to talk to their parents in response to bullying than those without disability (42%).
- Reporting via official channels was far less prevalent among young gamers with disability who experienced bullying or griefing (36% in response to bullying, 21% in response to griefing). This included reporting to game moderators or in the game (28% in response to bullying, 18% in response to griefing). A very small proportion had reported to eSafety (5% in response to bullying, 3% in response to griefing) or the police (2% in response to bullying, none in response to griefing).
- Close to a third of young gamers with disability stopped playing the game, either for a while or for good (30% in response to bullying, 30% in response to griefing).
- Similar proportions chose to ignore the bullying or trolling behaviour (34% in response to bullying, 27% in response to griefing).
- Retaliation was another response. Close to a third (32%) of young gamers with disability responded to bullying by doing or saying something similar back to defend themselves, while 3 in 10 (29%) responded to griefing in this way.

[4] Responses to other negative experiences, such as hate speech or being asked for nude images, are not examined, as the sample size of gamers with disability who had those experiences wasn't large enough for analysis.

Table 4: Responses to bullying-type behaviours and griefing

	Bullying-type behaviours		Griefing	
	With disability	Without disability	With disability	Without disability
Did something (combined)	**92%**	**92%**	**88%**	**87%**
Tried to stop it directly (combined)	**75%**	**67%**	**64%**	**58%**
blocked or unfriended them	44%	41%	47% ↑	27%
asked them to stop doing it	44%	35%	38%	34%
turned off chat or messaging in the game or console	28%	27%	24%	24%
changed my privacy or contact settings	11%	9%	6%	6%
Talked to someone / sought support (combined)	**65% ↑**	**53%**	**53%**	**46%**
I don't want to say	1%	2%	1%	3%
talked to my parents about it	57% ↑	42%	45%	41%
talked to a friend about it	24%	19%	14%	11%
talked to another adult about it	7%	4%	9% ↑	2%
contacted a helpline or online support service	2%	2%	3% ↑	0%
defended myself by doing or saying something similar back	32%	28%	29%	19%
Reported it (combined)	**36%**	**28%**	**21%**	**17%**
reported it to the game moderators, or I reported it in the game	28%	24%	18%	16%
reported it to eSafety	5%	4%	3%	1%
reported it to someone else	7% ↑	2%	3% ↑	0%
reported it to the police	2%	2%	0%	0%
stopped playing that game (for a while or for good)	30%	25%	30%	24%
ignored them	34%	30%	27%	30%
didn't do anything	6%	7%	11%	8%
did something else	2%	3%	5%	3%
Base: Gamers aged 8–17 who had each experience	**112**	**456**	**66**	**264**

Q. When other players did these hurtful or upsetting things to you in the past year, what (if anything) did you do? In the past year, when another player … what (if anything) did you do?

Bullying-type behaviour and griefing adversely affect the self-esteem and wellbeing of young gamers with disability

Overall, the negative impacts of bullying-type behaviour and griefing were more pronounced among young gamers with disability, as shown in Table 5.[5]

- Close to half (48%) of young gamers with disability who had experienced bullying-type behaviour said this had resulted in at least one negative impact in their life.
- Almost 2 in 5 (39%) who had experienced griefing said they had at least one negative impact as a result.
- These rates were significantly higher than for young gamers without disability (38% and 25%, respectively).

Negative impacts to self-esteem and wellbeing were more likely to be experienced by young gamers with disability compared to their peers without disability. In relation to experiencing bullying-type behaviours:

- Young gamers with disability were more likely to say they felt bad about themselves (27%, compared to 16% of those without disability).

They were also more likely to say they felt more worried, anxious and sad as a result of being bullied (27%, compared to 14%). In relation to griefing:

- Young gamers with disability were twice as likely to feel bad about themselves as a result of griefing (15%, compared to 6%).
- They were far more likely to say they had lost some of their friends as a result (11% compared to 3% of those without disability). They were also more likely to report having more arguments with family and friends because of it (15%, compared to 3% of those without disability).

[5] The sample size of young gamers who had other negative experiences was too small for analysis of impacts.

Table 5: Impacts of bullying-type behaviours and griefing[6]

	Bullying-type behaviours		Griefing	
	With disability	Without disability	With disability	Without disability
Yes, I started feeling bad about myself	27% ↑	16%	15% ↑	6%
Yes, I started feeling more worried, anxious or sad	27% ↑	14%	15%	8%
Yes, I had more arguments with my family or friends	13%	12%	15% ↑	3%
Yes, I lost some of my friends	11%	8%	11% ↑	3%
Yes, I started treating other people badly (or worse than usual)	6%	6%	8%	3%
Yes, I was less interested in meeting up with friends	5%	6%	6%	3%
Yes, I found it harder to concentrate at school, study or work	8%	9%	6%	3%
Yes, people started thinking or saying bad things about me	7%	8%	3%	3%
Yes, I felt less close to my family or friends	6%	5%	6%	3%
Yes, I had other difficulties or challenges because of what happened	4%	4%	6% ↑	2%
No, I didn't have any difficulties or challenges	36% ↓	49%	47% ↓	61%
I don't know or I'm not sure	14%	11%	12%	11%
I don't want to say	2%	2%	2%	2%
Any of these impacts (combined)	48% ↑	38%	39% ↑	25%
Base: Young gamers with disability who experienced bullying/young gamers with disability who experienced griefing	**112**	**456**	**66**	**264**

Q. In the past year, did you have any difficulties or challenges because another player ...

[6] The sample size of gamers who had other types of negative experiences wasn't large enough for analysis of impacts.

Two in 5 teen gamers with disability encounter content and ideas associated with harm while gaming

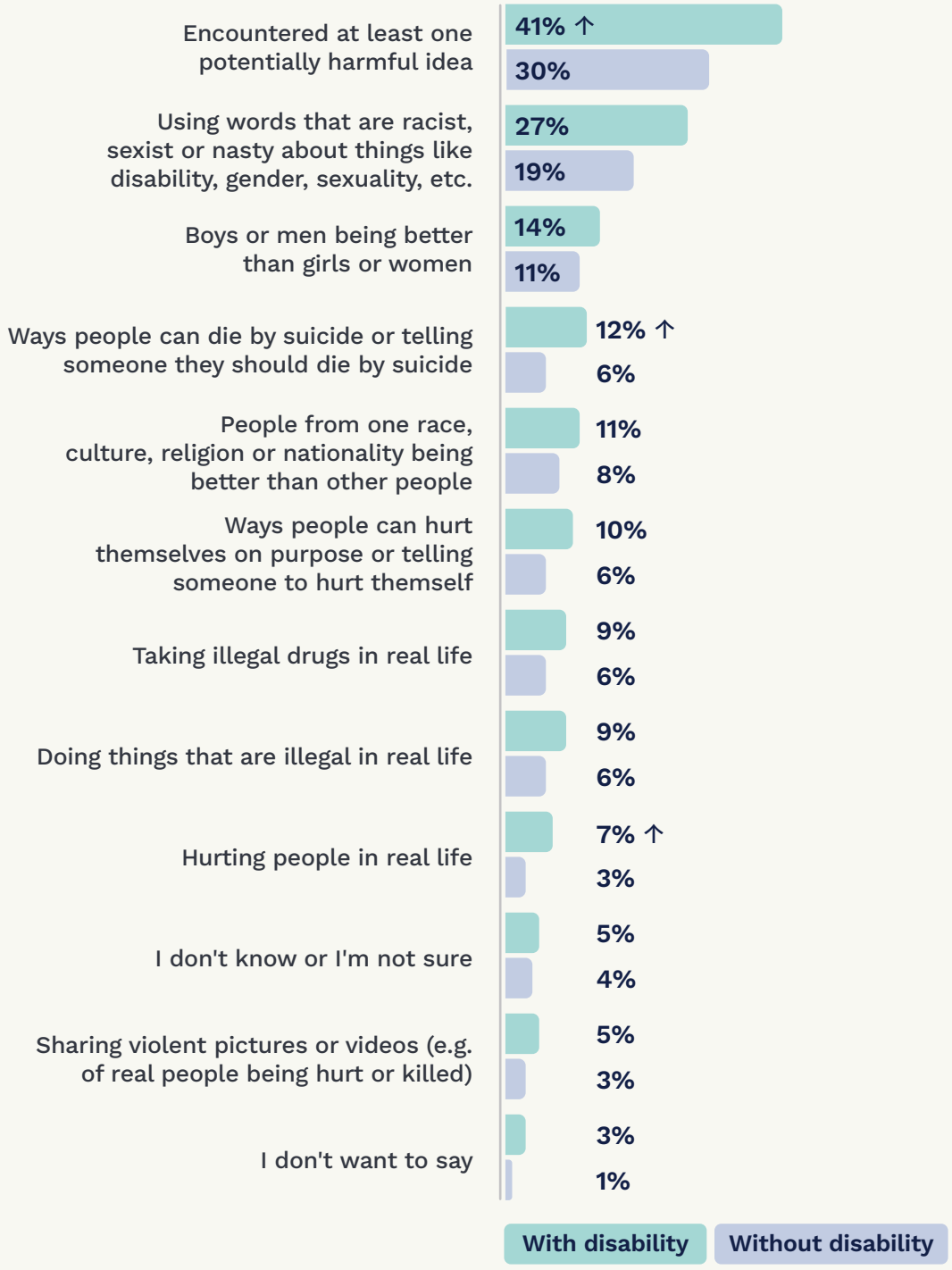
Content warning

The next section of this report discusses suicide and other material that some people may find distressing. Please consider if reading this section is right for you at this time.

Our survey found that teen gamers with disability (aged 13–17) were more likely to have encountered at least one type of content and ideas associated with harm (shown in Figure 14) while gaming in the past year than teen gamers without disability (41%, compared to 30%).

- Teen gamers with disability were twice as likely as teen gamers without disability to have been exposed to other players showing, sharing or talking about ways people can die by suicide, or telling someone they should die by suicide (12%, compared to 6%).
- Teen gamers with disability were just over twice as likely to have been exposed by other players to material about hurting people in real life than teen gamers without disability (7%, compared to 3%).

Figure 14: Exposure to content and ideas associated with harm



Q. In the past year, have you seen other players show, share or talk about any of these things?

Base: 128 gamers with disability aged 13–17; 793 gamers without disability aged 13–17.

A minority of young gamers with disability have experienced grooming-type behaviour or online hate while gaming

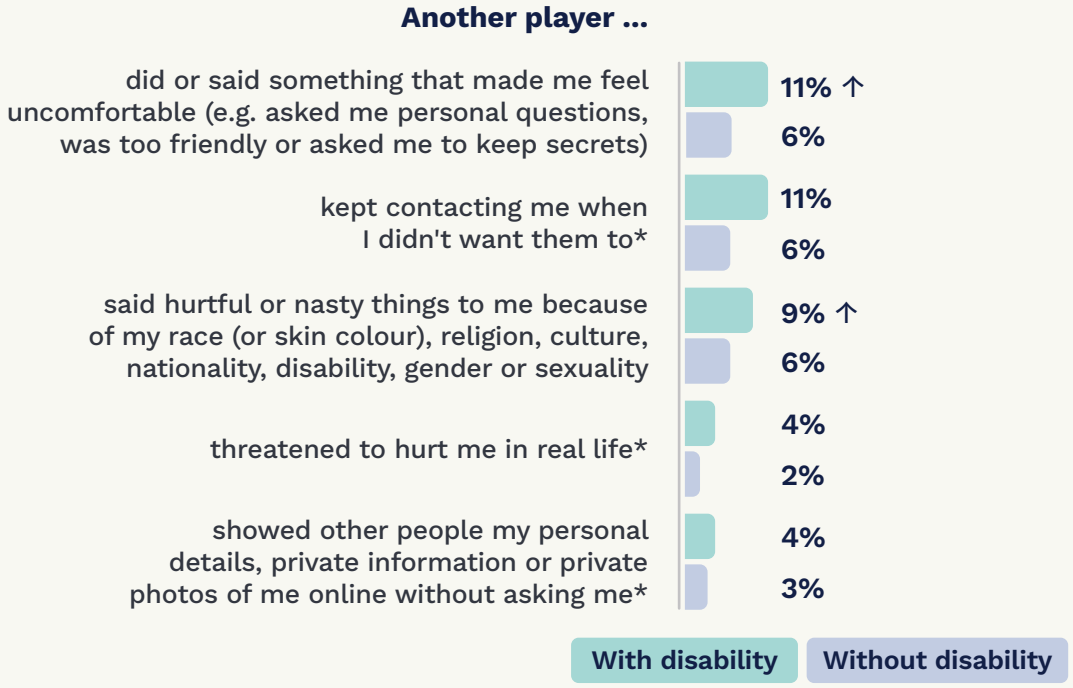
Around 1 in 10 (11%) young gamers with disability had experienced another player doing or saying something that made them feel uncomfortable in the past year, such as asking them personal questions, being too friendly, or asking them to keep secrets (see Figure 15). These types of interactions could be indicative of online grooming.

While a minority of young gamers with disability had experienced grooming-type behaviour, they were almost twice as likely to experience it than those without disability (6%).

Around 1 in 10 (9%) young gamers with disability had experienced other players saying hurtful things to them because of their race, religion, culture, nationality, disability, gender or sexuality. This is also known as 'online hate'. Young gamers with disability were more likely to have experienced online hate than those without disability (6%).

Around 1 in 10 (11%) teen gamers with disability experienced unwanted contact, while fewer experienced threats of harm (4%) or of having their personal information shared online without their consent (4%). Only teen gamers were asked about these online risks.

Figure 15: Grooming-type behaviour, online hate and other negative experiences.



*Question asked of those aged 13+ only.

Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?

Base: 276 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,516 gamers without disability aged 8–17; 128 teen gamers with disability aged 13–17; 793 teen gamers without disability aged 13–17.

A small minority of young gamers with disability received or were asked for sexual images and communication

Our survey asked young people about their experiences of sexual communication. These experiences could include circumstances in which the sharing and receiving of nude images and videos was consensual, and experiences that were positive for those involved. However, sexual communications can also be negative experiences for young people.

Overall, close to 1 in 10 (9%) young gamers with disability said they had received or been asked for nudes or sexual information, higher than for those without disability (6%) (see Table 6). This was higher for teen gamers with disability (15%) than for child gamers with disability (4%) (see Table A6 in Appendix B).

Looking at this data in more detail, a minority (7%) of teen gamers with disability said they had been sent sexual messages or had sexual comments made about them while gaming. Teen gamers without disability reported this experience at a similar rate (4%). Small proportions of young gamers with disability said they had been asked to send nude pictures (4%), been asked to tell another gamer about private parts of their body (2%), been sent nude pictures of another gamer (4%), received nude pictures (3%), or been sent nude pictures of other people (e.g. pornography) (3%) while gaming.

Table 6: Receiving or being asked for nude images or sexual information

	With disability	Without disability
Received or asked for nude images or sexual information (combined)	9% ↑	6%
sent me sexual messages or made sexual comments about me*	7% (of teens)	4% (of teens)
asked me to send them naked or nude pictures or videos of myself	4%	3%
sent me naked or nude pictures or videos of themselves	4%	2%
sent me naked or nude pictures or videos of other people (e.g. pornography)	3%	2%
asked me to tell them about private parts of my body	2%	2%
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 8–17	**276**	**1,516**

*Question asked of those aged 13–17 only. Base is 128 teen gamers with disability and 728 teen gamers without disability.

Q. In the past year, have any other players asked you to do any of these things while you've been playing video games online?

Q. In the past year, have any other players sent you any of these things while you've been playing video games online?

Young gamers with disability who spend more time gaming online are more likely to have negative experiences

Findings from our survey suggest that for young gamers with disability, the incidence of having any negative experience or exposure to content and ideas associated with harm is higher for those who spend more than 12 hours a week gaming online (68%, compared to 50% of those who spend 6.5–12 hours per week and 46% of those who spend 0–6 hours per week) (see Table A8 in Appendix B).

Safety strategies used by young gamers with disability

Generally, use of safety practices by young gamers with disability is similar to use by their peers without disability. However, the key difference is that young gamers with disability were less likely to limit who they interacted with in a gaming environment but more likely to limit *how* they communicated with them.

Most young gamers with disability take steps to stay safe while gaming

The vast majority (93%) of young gamers with disability said they usually implement safety practices in their online gaming, although they were slightly less likely to do so than those without disability (96%) (see Figure 16).

Young gamers with disability were less likely than those without disability to say they usually limited who they play or communicate with (70%, compared to 79%).[7] This included only adding or accepting friend requests from players they already knew (39%, compared to 47%).

However, young gamers with disability were more likely than those without disability to take certain steps to limit their use of communication features while gaming.

- Around 2 in 5 young gamers with disability reported that they usually mute or block other players who do or say things that made them feel uncomfortable (compared to 34% of young gamers without disability).
- Close to 3 in 10 young gamers with disability reported that they usually turn off text chat or messaging in the game or console so they can't see other players messaging (compared to 21% of their peers without disability).

Young people with disability may be initiating these safety practices to mitigate experiences of bullying, harassment or exposure to inappropriate content.

A much higher proportion of teen gamers with disability aged 13–17 reported that they usually hide certain things about themselves from other players to avoid being picked on, such as their disability, gender, race or sexuality (29%, compared to 17% of teen gamers without disability).[8] This may be another means of mitigating bullying, harassment or online hate. The higher rate of hiding identity characteristics may reflect that some young people with disability are concerned about the implications of revealing their disability or other aspects of their identity while gaming online. It might indicate that the gaming environment may not always be inclusive or welcoming for young people with disability or other intersecting characteristics. However, it also shows that online gaming affords young gamers with disability a means for taking control of their identity: within a gaming environment, they have a greater degree of control over how they choose to express aspects of their disability (Wästerfors & Hansson, 2017).

[7] This includes only adding/accepting friend requests from players they already know, only communicating with players they already know, setting their account to private, playing games or using servers that only have people they already know in them, or only playing on their own.

[8] This response option was shown only to those aged 13–17.

Figure 16: Safety rules or practices implemented by young gamers with disability

Q. Which of these things (if any) do you usually do to make playing video games online safer?

Base: 274 gamers with disability aged 8–17; 1,502 gamers without disability aged 8–17.

*Base for this response option was teen gamers aged 13–17.

Conclusion

Empowering young gamers with disability to realise the benefits of gaming while navigating the risks

Our research offers a rare glimpse into the gaming experiences of young people with disability: their participation in the gaming world, their feelings about and attitudes towards gaming, and the ways they navigate the risks and potential harms in online games.

Gaming has rewards as well as risks

For young gamers with disability, online gaming is more than fun and games. Online games can provide an avenue for social inclusion, skill development and emotional benefits, and are a platform for positive feelings and prosocial behaviour. Our survey found that a strength of young gamers with disability is their ability to engage positively with other players online.

However, young gamers with disability are also more likely than young gamers without disability to have had negative experiences such as exposure to bullying-type behaviour, griefing, exposure to content and ideas associated with harm, online hate and grooming-type behaviour. The impacts of negative experiences such as bullying-type behaviours and griefing can be more keenly felt by young gamers with disability.

For all stakeholders, the challenge is how best to support young people with disability in gaming environments, without limiting their agency and autonomy, so that they can be empowered to enjoy gaming's benefits. For young people with disabilities, many play spaces and activities that their peers without disability take for granted – such as those in schools, communities and public playgrounds – can be inaccessible, exclusionary or unsafe (Alper & Goggin, 2017). Digital spaces, if accessible and inclusive, can support the play of young people with disability in ways that offer them agency, control, participation and safety. Online gaming, like social, mobile and digital media, is also very much part of the everyday life of children and young people with disability, just like for their peers without disability (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

The importance of digital play

We found that, for young gamers with disability, participation in online gaming is driven by the desire for fun and enjoyment, and for the freedom it provides them to explore, to use their imaginations and to be creative – in other words, by the desire to play. The importance of free play in a digital world has been recognised in recent research with children (Livingstone & Pothong, 2021) as well as in child rights frameworks (United Nations, 2021).

Where opportunities for free play may be limited offline for young people with disability, due to inaccessible physical spaces or social barriers, online gaming can provide an important avenue for play and social inclusion.

These insights suggest the following steps to support the digital play of young gamers with disability:

- Provide guidance for parents and caregivers that highlights the importance of digital play, as well as the skill development, social connection and emotional benefits that young gamers with disability can gain from online gaming.
- Provide parents and caregivers with suggestions as to the types of games that facilitate open-ended free play and intergenerational co-playing.
- Design games that maximise opportunities for free play.

Ensuring accessibility and inclusion in games

Given the importance of digital play for young gamers with disability, it is critical that online gaming environments don't introduce new, inaccessible spaces for young people with disability (Alper & Goggin, 2017). Accessibility is also important from an online safety perspective. Our survey found that only around a third of young gamers with disability who experienced bullying-type behaviour had reported it to official channels (e.g. in the game or to game moderators). Accessible safety means ensuring that relevant online safety information, game mechanisms and features that enable safer gameplay, and access to reporting mechanisms, are fully available to all gamers, including those with disability. These insights suggest the following:

- There is an opportunity for industry to improve the accessibility and ease of use of reporting mechanisms, as well as the effectiveness of action in response to reports and feedback to those making reports.
- There could be further work by a range of stakeholders to raise awareness about reporting features among young gamers with disability, as well as providing guidance on the kinds of behaviours that should be reported.

Creating safer gaming spaces

The higher rates at which young gamers with disability who participated in our study and indicated they had experienced bullying behaviours – in particular, exclusion – and online hate in comparison with their peers without disability suggest that gaming spaces aren't always inclusive, welcoming or safe for young people with disability. Young gamers with disability were also more likely to experience other players sharing or talking about content or ideas associated with harm. A possible contributing factor to these negative experiences may be games cultures that perpetuate or tolerate exclusion, discrimination and other negative behaviours by players. Negative behaviours in gaming are sometimes referred to as 'toxicity' (Unity, 2023).

Our findings suggest the following:

- A range of measures is needed to address toxicity in online games. Better reporting mechanisms, and increased efforts to raise awareness of community guidelines and to ensure these are enforced, could help to address toxic gaming cultures. These measures should be complemented by effective technology-based in-game moderation to ensure that gaming companies are proactive in identifying negative behaviours. Measures such as rating players on prosocial behaviour, rewarding positive interactions in games, and rating games based on positive culture could help to uplift behavioural norms and promote the creation of more positive gaming cultures.
- Accessibility, inclusion and game design could be improved through collaborative research and workshops involving key stakeholders such as young gamers with disability, game developers, designers, researchers, advocates and parents.
- Programs that support young people with disability to participate in gaming by increasing their resilience and capability can improve inclusion and accessibility. An example of such a program is the EsportsAble project. Led by Queensland University of Technology, the project aims to create safer and more welcoming esports communities for high school students who have mental health conditions that affect their ability to participate in social situations.

The role of digital citizenship and online safety education

Our survey found that young gamers with disability are more likely than those without disability to experience and engage in bullying-type behaviour. Many reported responding to bullying-type behaviours by retaliating. We also found that young gamers with disability are less likely to limit who they play with online.

These findings suggest the following:

- All young people, regardless of disability, could benefit from digital citizenship education about bullying behaviours in a gaming environment. This should include education on responding constructively to bullying experiences, rather than retaliating.
- Digital citizenship education and advice tailored for young gamers with disability could help them to better understand which behaviours may be perceived as bullying or negative in a gaming context. It could include guidance on recognising such behaviours in themselves and others and knowing how to respond appropriately when they occur.
- There is a need for more targeted education for young people with disability and their parents and caregivers on navigating social interactions with people not known in person. This would better equip young people with disability to identify and respond to inappropriate contact online.

Encouraging healthy gaming habits

Time spent gaming online emerged as an issue of concern for some young gamers, who recognised it as a source of tension with their parents or caregivers. However, time spent gaming online was associated with positive experiences as well as negative ones, suggesting that a nuanced approach is needed.

While young gamers with disability report positive feelings and benefits from gaming, such as a sense of connection or of feeling calm or better, it is important that gaming isn't the only avenue for these needs to be met and that a range of options are available to young people.

These insights suggest the following:

- Stakeholders could provide young gamers with disability and their parents and caregivers with guidance on how to manage time spent gaming online, including how to manage transitions to other activities, how to use parental controls to set time limits on gaming, how to recognise when online gaming may be negatively impacting the young person, and how parents/caregivers can work together with young people to put in place strategies to manage their time spent gaming online.
- This guidance, together with advice for parents and caregivers about the benefits of online gaming and the types of games that facilitate open-ended digital play and have positive cultures, could help to address parental concerns as well as destigmatise time spent gaming online.
- Young gamers with disability would benefit from game design that better enables them to manage their time spent gaming online. For example, design could include proactive safeguards such as prompts to take a break and that minimise 'dark patterns' – that is, design practices that trick users into doing things they wouldn't otherwise have done (Brignull, 2010), such as spending more time or money on playing a game.
- Information could be provided to young people and their parents/caregivers about the extent to which specific games contain dark patterns – for example, through an independent rating system.
- There is an opportunity for the gaming industry to design parental controls and settings that better enable young gamers and their parents and caregivers to manage their game time. These controls should be easy to use and be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of different families and ages.

Targeted advice about gaming for young people with disability and their parents/caregivers and educators

Resources about gaming that are tailored to the needs of parents and caregivers of young gamers with disability are emerging. They should include information for parents about the benefits of playing online games with their child and how to do so. For example:

- The Australian autism organisation AMAZE has released **resources** to help parents and caregivers understand the world of video games and to promote healthy gaming. The resources include a **guide** to parental controls available on different gaming platforms, as well as advice for parents about playing with their child to better understand the game and whether it's safe. These resources were funded under the eSafety Commissioner grants program.
- The UK organisation Internet Matters has, in collaboration with Roblox, developed **resources** to support neurodivergent gamers.

These resources are targeted towards neurodivergent young people and their parents and caregivers. There is scope to develop resources specific to other groups of young people with disability.

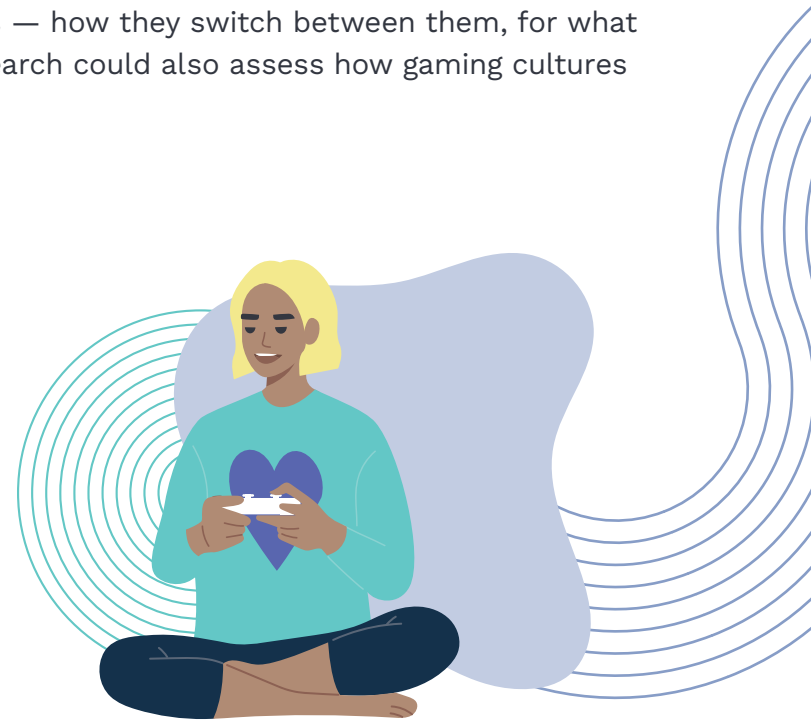
There are also general resources about gaming available for parents and educators. For example:

- eSafety's gaming club guide, available on the eSafety website at **Prepare 6 – Guidelines for setting up a Gaming club.pdf**, can help educators to facilitate safer gaming for young people.
- Information available on the eSafety website at **Gaming | eSafety Commissioner** includes a **guide** for parents on how to have conversations about gaming with their children, plus **information** about the benefits and risks of gaming, and how to manage the risks.

Directions for future research: A richer understanding of the online experiences of young gamers with disability

Our findings suggest a range of possible directions for future research, especially in collaboration with young people themselves, to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of young gamers with disability.

- Research that examines the distinct online gaming experiences of young people with different and diverse disabilities. This includes examining how differences vary across disability types and how these differences shape engagement with games.
- An exploration of the online gaming experiences of young people with disability who are LGBTQIA+, gender diverse, culturally and linguistically diverse, or First Nations, and the intersectionalities among these. While our survey included participants from these groups, the sample size was not sufficient for detailed analysis.
- Research providing a more detailed examination of the communication patterns and dynamics of young gamers with disability, and whether current game design supports their communication preferences. For instance, a 2024 study of social games found that some gamers with disability didn't communicate due to a lack of suitable options, highlighting the need for multiple communication methods in games (Baltzar et al., 2024).
- Future studies could explore how young gamers with disability engage with different kinds of games and game environments — how they switch between them, for what purposes and with what risks. This research could also assess how gaming cultures influence accessibility and inclusion.



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Appendix B: Additional data tables

All additional data tables are of young gamers with disability only.

Table A1: Time online, by age and gender

Time spent gaming per week	Total – Young gamers with disability	Aged 8–12	Aged 13–17	Girl	Boy
0–6 hrs	25%	23%	28%	36% ↑	18%
6.5–12 hrs	32%	34%	30%	36%	31%
More than 12 hrs	42%	42%	42%	28%	50% ↑
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 13–17/parents of gamers with disability aged 8–12 who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week.	**271**	**145**	**126**	**111**	**153**

Q. PARENTS OF GAMERS AGED 8–12: How long does your child usually spend playing video games (on any device) on each day of the week during term time (not during school holidays)?
Q. GAMERS AGED 13–17: How long do you usually spend playing video games online on each day of the week (on any device)? Think about how long you play during term time (not school holidays).

Table A2: Direct communication while gaming, by age and gender

Messaged or talked to people online while playing video games online	Total – Young gamers with disability	Aged 8–12	Aged 13–17	Girl	Boy
Yes	66%	57%	77% ↑	63%	69%
No	28%	36% ↑	18%	31%	26%
I don't know or I'm not sure	5%	5%	4%	5%	4%
I don't want to say	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 8–17.	**276**	**148**	**128**	**115**	**154**

Q. In the past year, how did you message or talk to people while you were playing video games online? This could be as part of the game (e.g. to help each other or because you were in the same team). Or it could be in gaming forums, chat rooms or streaming platforms.

Table A3: Positive interactions, by time spent gaming online per week

Experienced or engaged in positive interactions while playing video games online	Total	0–6 hrs	6.5–12 hrs	More than 12 hrs
Positive interactions experienced (combined)	**62%**	**45%**	**57%**	**75% ↑**
worked with me as part of a team	49%	35%	43%	61% ↑
helped me to play better	42%	33%	38%	52% ↑
did something else to help or be nice to me	26%	20%	23%	32%
stood up for me (e.g. if someone else in the game was treating me in a nasty or hurtful way)	24%	13%	18%	34% ↑
asked me if I was okay or supported me in another way	20%	12%	14%	31% ↑
Positive interactions engaged in (combined)	**70%**	**55%**	**69%**	**81% ↑**
I worked with other players as part of a team	56%	41%	57%	66% ↑
I helped another player to play better	51%	41%	45%	61% ↑
I stood up for or defended another player (e.g. if someone in the game was being nasty or hurtful to them)	34%	16%	28%	49% ↑
I did something else to help or be nice to other players	31%	25%	30%	36%
I asked another player if they were okay or supported them in another way	26%	20%	14%	39% ↑
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 13–17/parents of young gamers aged 8–12 (for time spent gaming: who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	**276**	**69**	**88**	**114**

Q. In the past year, have you done any of these things while you were playing video games?
Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?

Table A4: Perceived benefits, by time spent gaming online

Perceived benefits of gaming	Total – Young gamers with disability	0–6 hrs	6.5–12 hrs	More than 12 hrs
Benefits (combined)	93%	88%	94%	94%
Skill development (combined)	**79%**	**72%**	**76%**	**84%**
get better at using digital technology	52%	49%	41%	61% ↑
learn something new	47%	42%	44%	52%
get better at solving problems	45%	42%	36%	55% ↑
think faster	34%	28%	33%	38%
Social connection (combined)	**63%**	**51%**	**61%**	**73% ↑**
feel less lonely	41%	22%	41%	53% ↑
get to know my friends better	33%	20%	31%	44% ↑
make new friends	24%	12%	13%	39% ↑
feel like I belong to a community	22%	16%	19%	30%
get on with or work better with other people	16%	10%	10%	25% ↑
Emotional benefits (combined)	**54%**	**49%**	**49%**	**61%**
with my mental health (how I think and feel)	32%	32%	26%	37%
feel more confident	31%	22%	24%	42% ↑
get better at controlling my feelings	20%	19%	15%	24%
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 13–17/parents of young gamers aged 8–12 (for time spent gaming: who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	**276**	**69**	**88**	**114**

Q. Has playing video games online helped you in any of these ways or not?

Table A5: Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm, by time spent gaming online

Negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm in the past year	Total – Young gamers with disability	Low 0– 6 hrs	Medium: 6.5– 12 hrs	High: More than 12 hrs
Any negative experience (combined)	**53%**	**29%**	**51% ↑**	**68% ↑**
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 13–17/ parents of young gamers aged 8–12 (who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	271	69	88	114
Any negative experience or exposure to content associated with harm (combined)	**59%**	**46%**	**50% ↑**	**74% ↑**
Base: Teen gamers with disability aged 13–17 (who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	126	35	38	53

Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, did another player do any of these things to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players asked you to do any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players sent you any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. IF AGED 13–17: In the past year, have you seen other players show, share or talk about any of these things?

Table A6: Asked for or received nude images or sexual messages, by age and gender

Asked for or received nude images or sexual messages in the past year	Total	Age		Gender	
		8–12	13–17	Girl	Boy
Asked for or received nude images or sexual information (combined)	9%	4%	15% ↑	10%	7%
asked me to send them naked or nude pictures or videos of myself	4%	3%	5%	3%	3%
sent me naked or nude pictures or videos of themself	4%	2%	5%	4%	2%
IF AGE 13–17: sent me sexual messages or made sexual comments about me*	3%	N/A	7%	8% (of teens)	5% (of teens)
IF AGE 8–12: sent me naked or nude pictures or videos of other people / IF AGE 13+: naked or nude pictures or videos of other people (e.g. pornography)	3%	3%	4%	6%	1%
asked me to tell them about private parts of my body	2%	1%	4%	3%	1%
I don't know or I'm not sure	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%
I don't want to say	2%	1%	2%	1%	3%
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 8–17.	**276**	**148**	**128**	**115**	**154**

*Question asked of those aged 13–17 only.

Q. In the past year, have any other players asked you to do any of these things while you have been playing video games online?

Q. In the past year, have any other players sent you any of these things while you have been playing video games online?

Table A7: Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm, by age and gender

Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm, by age and gender	Total – Young gamers with disability	Aged 8–12	Aged 13–17	Girl	Boy
Any negative experience (combined)	53%	54%	52%	43%	59% ↑
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 8–17.	**276**	**148**	**128**	**115**	**154**
Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm (combined)	59%	NA	59%	47%	68% ↑
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 8–17.	**276**	**148**	**128**	**115**	**154**

Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, did another player do any of these things to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players asked you to do any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players sent you any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. IF AGED 13–17: In the past year, have you seen other players show, share or talk about any of these things?

Table A8: Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm, by time spent gaming online

Negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm in the past year	Total – Young gamers with disability	0–6 hrs	6.5–12 hrs	More than 12 hrs
Any negative experience (combined)	53%	29%	51% ↑	68% ↑
Base: Young gamers with disability aged 13–17/ parents of young gamers aged 8–12 (who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	**271**	**69**	**88**	**114**
Any negative experience or exposure to ideas associated with harm (combined)	59%	46%	50% ↑	74% ↑
Base: Teen gamers with disability aged 13–17 (who provided usual time spent gaming for each day of the week).	**126**	**35**	**38**	**53**

Q. In the past year, did any of these things happen to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, did another player do any of these things to you while you were playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players asked you to do any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. In the past year, have any other players sent you any of these things while you have been playing video games online?
Q. IF AGED 13–17: In the past year, have you seen other players show, share or talk about any of these things?