

# ONLINE GAMES: HOW TO KEEP OUR CHILDREN SAFE?

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, internet has been an integral part of the lives of the old and young alike. Internet has become reservoir of unprecedented level of services and information, providing the young and old an opportunity to explore new horizons and meet unknown people from different countries. The flexibility of the internet to cater to the tastes of different age groups and the anonymity it offers has only added to its popularity. Given all its benefits, internet has emerged as the new panacea for the loneliness and depression.<sup>1</sup>

Modern technology has paved way for the introduction for a wide range of interactive games which have lured many of the children. Given the increasing popularity of online games on account of its apparently challenging nature, dangerous online games undoubtedly constitute one of the newer forms of threat facing children. *Albeit* they may *prima facie* appear innocuous, these

games seek to exploit the vulnerabilities of the children. Even though some children might be fortunate to escape physical harm, their abnormal online behavior may detrimentally affect them psychologically in terms of poor socializing skills and even cost them their academic grades. Psychologically speaking, most of the children are easily drawn to these online challenging games their desperate attempt to gain popularity on social media. In other words, generally children suffering from very low self-esteem, in their tireless effort to achieve validation, are easily drawn to such 'daring' games.

When we speak of children's right, the question of securing the rights of the children assumes paramount significance. Protection of children in the cyber space has been increasingly daunting experience because of the tussle between the right to freedom and expression and the social interest in the safety of the minors. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that the every child has

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## PREFERRED CITATION

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<sup>1</sup> Erik van Ingen & Kevin B. Wright, *Predictors of mobilizing online coping versus offline coping resources after negative life events*, 59 COMPUTERS IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR 431–439 (2016).

the right to be protected from being exploited or taken advantage of.<sup>2</sup> Children are an integral part of the family, society and state, hence their well-being is a matter of concern at the individual, societal and national level. The present paper deals with how the parents (read guardians), educational institutions and the State can play a collective role in protecting the children (read wards) from the onslaught of dangerous online games that seeks to prey on the vulnerabilities of the young minds, and this present role

### **ROLE OF PARENTS**

According to the social learning theory, human behaviour is the result of continuous reciprocal interaction between the cognitive, behavioral and environmental behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Children are easily drawn to adopt the behavior of their peers. In the world of the peer pressure, most of the children tend to follow what their counterparts or yield to peer pressure just to 'fit in'. To put it in simple words, children are often seeking validation and approval, and in their tireless pursuit of the same, they are willing to engage with the similar activities as that of their peers without proper analysis of its pros and cons. In such circumstances, it is necessary for parents keep a close watch not only on their

child but those who surround their child as well.

With the mounting pressures of life, many parents find it difficult to strike a balance between the pressures of life and work. In this tussle, most often, the personal life goes for a toss as parents find it difficult to spare sufficient quality time to bond with their children. This has left the children left on their own to deal with their own insecurities and stress thrown at them from different quarters, be it school, friends etc. Added to this, with more families opting for a nuclear family setup, the problem is only exacerbated in the absence of support that a joint family structure provides.

However, the most spontaneous response when the news of such dangerous captures the headlines is that why does not the government block such games? But we are missing the big picture: banning a particular online game only creates space of similar games to crop in the digital world. Speaking in economic terms, we need to understand that as long as the demand exists, supply will be ensured. What we should be ideally looking for is addressing the underlying issue. Isn't it too native to assume that someone

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<sup>2</sup> *Article 36 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. - States Parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Glanz & Donald B. Bishop, *The Role of Behavioral Science Theory in Development and Implementation of Public Health Interventions*, 31 ANNUAL REVIEW OF PUBLIC HEALTH 399–418 (2010).

would kill themselves or anyone else just because a game asked them to do so?

When it comes to keeping a check on the involvement of the children in these online games, needless to say, the parental regulation is the most effective. Since parents have the most direct access to these children, their active role is indispensable. It is important that parents should start understanding distress signals of their children.

In a society where mental illness is still considered a taboo, most of the parents rather than seeking professional medical help, try to sweep under the rug and choose to live in a delusion that all is well. This is probably one of the worst ways to deal with the problem. With the right medical intervention at the right time, many of the young lives can be saved. Hence, it is incumbent for the parents and pedagogue to keep a close watch on the online and offline life of the children.

Parents need to be weary if their children are found to be spending unreasonably long hours on the internet/computer even if the children claim that they are working on school projects or assignments. Often, when things go wrong, the natural tendency is pass

on the buck to the peers of their children, schools, etc. However, it is important that even before anything goes out of hand, parents have an important role: they should talk to their children and try explaining and putting everything in perspective. Most of the children have access to the internet without any supervision because parents either assume their young ones are relatively safer in a digital world than in reality or for the lack of time on the part of the parents. Be it as it may, it is important that parents should start taking charge: they should learn to engage with the children on how to behave online (eg. not sharing personal information, correctly identify something wrong when they see them online especially in the case of fake advertisements etc.). But this is only possible if parents are equipped themselves. This calls for some active involvement and learning on the part of parents either in the form of community learning or self-learning.<sup>4</sup> At the least, parents should be aware of the digital world as much as their child.

## ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

There are reports to suggest that the student classroom ratio and the pupil teacher ratio has improved,<sup>5</sup> but focusing on numbers

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<sup>4</sup> Joanna Whitehead, *Parents should play online video games with children, says online safety group*, THE INDEPENDENT (2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/parents-video-games->

[children-online-risks-benefits-safety-internet-a8994601.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/parents-video-games-children-online-risks-benefits-safety-internet-a8994601.html) (last visited Nov 9, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Economic Survey Underlines Government's Commitment to Achieve SDG-4 For Education, <https://pib.gov.in/>

alone might not be the solution. There is a need to ensure the teachers are able to connect with each student at an individual level. This can be built only on a relation based on trust and mutual respect. Unfortunately, teachers are burdened with many tasks that they might not be able to devote individual attention to each child. In the process, teachers miss out the distress signals exhibited by the children. Most of the teachers are adjudged based on the scores of their students, and thus teachers generally tend to focus on the scores of the students. This needs to change: teachers need to focus on the mental well-being of the students as well. If a student displays a deviant behaviour or earns bad grades, teachers should go to the underlying issue.

At the larger level, the social ecological model would be of help. According to this model, human behavior shapes and are being shaped by the social environment. Hence, to create a change in behavioral pattern, it is necessary to create an environment that facilitates such change. Educational institutions have the

main role to play in this domain. Since children spend most of their time at schools, it is easier for the educational institutions to monitor the children, and create a favorable environment for the behavioral change at the level of students. Educational institutions can also play a pivotal role by putting in place psychological and emotional support structures which are non-judgmental and readily accessible to children.

### ROLE OF THE STATE

In the wake of events involving the death of many children taking up the Blue Whale Challenge, the Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smt. Maneka Gandhi, requested the Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Information Technology to remove the games from the social media sites.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of many suicides attributable to the online game challenge, Blue Whale, it has been reported that the government in exercise of power under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000,<sup>7</sup> ordered

Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1518062 (last visited Nov 10, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Shubhangini Aggarwal, *Blue Whale Challenge Continues To Take Lives, Requires "Suitable Intervention": Maneka Gandhi*, BUSINESSWORLD, August 16, 2017. Also available at <http://www.businessworld.in/article/Blue-Whale-Challenge-Continues-To-Take-Lives-Requires-Suitable-Intervention-Maneka-Gandhi/16-08-2017-124189/>

<sup>7</sup> **Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000.- Power to issue directions for blocking for public access of any information through any computer resource.**

(1) Where the Central Government or any of its officers specially authorised by it in this behalf is satisfied that it is necessary or expedient so to do, in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognizable offence relating to above, it may subject to the provisions of sub-section (2) for reasons to be recorded in writing, by order, direct any agency of the Government or intermediary to block for access by the public or cause to be blocked for access by the public any information generated, transmitted, received, stored or hosted in any computer resource.

tech companies like Google, the social media players like Facebook, Instagram etc. to ensure that all the Blue Whale links are deleted from their platforms. In this context it is pertinent to understand these platforms do not necessarily exercise full and effective control over what is being posted on their sites. To make things worse, games like the Blue Whale Challenge are not something which is available for download in the form of app or a link. The curators (read predators) engage with their players (read victims) on a one-on-one basis without any one really being aware. Similarly, thinking about bringing the game administrators to book and bringing an end to the game might be too far-fetched. Often, it is very difficult to identify the game to a single person. In such circumstances, the ideal way to deal with the problem is to ensure that children are not drawn to such games in the first place. In other words, the State can play a very limited effective role in addressing the menace, this is evident from the line of the arguments in the *Sneha Kalita vs. Union of India and Ors.*<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

With the passage of time, newer form of threats have emerged which endanger the safety of the children, and one of the latest one being the online games which put the

lives of the young ones in jeopardy. Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence which mar their holistic development. In keeping our children safe from the onslaught of the online games, parents and educational institutions have a predominant role to play for children mostly watch or play these games in solitude. A vigilant watch over the young ones accompanied by instilling a sense of optimism will undoubtedly go a long way. The fact that children are easily drawn to such games is symbiotic of larger underlying problem. By banning a particular game might not be the answer. There is a need to address the deep underlying issue. This becomes sometimes difficult in a country like India, there is such a taboo attached with mental health. However, with greater awareness and having a structure that is non-judgmental and easily accessible may be the way forward. There is a need to have in place a multi-pronged approach to address challenges posed by dangerous online games. In other words, families, community and the state needs to work to work in tandem to protect our children from the onslaught of dangerous games.

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(2) The procedure and safeguards subject to which such blocking for access by the public may be carried out, shall be such as may be prescribed.

(3) The intermediary who fails to comply with the direction issued under sub-section (1) shall be

punished with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine.

<sup>8</sup> (2018)12 SCC 674