Pokémon Go – a parent's guide

In less than a week of its US release, Pokémon Go has become a gaming phenomenon – the augmented reality game can transform familiar surroundings into adventure playgrounds and its simple rules make it accessible for families to play together. But with reports of accidents, muggings and even the discovery of a dead body, we examine what parents can do to combat Pokémon danger

What is Pokémon Go?

A smartphone game featuring the infamous 90s characters that allows users to interact with the real world using the phone's camera and GPS capabilities.

This collaboration between Nintendo and Niantic Labs also uses augmented technology to allows players to catch Pokémon in real life.

Players will see a map of their current location that is super-imposed with their character and all of the game elements.

As players move around, different types of Pokémon (rats, snakes dragons etc) will appear, depending on where they are and what time it is.

Indoors or outdoors?

The idea is to encourage users to travel around the real world to catch these 'wild' Pokémon in the game. Different types of Pokémon can be found in different types of terrain and some types are easier to find in certain geographical locations.

If players want to hatch an egg (to produce a rare Pokémon) then they will need to walk: each egg requires 2 to 5 km walk before it will hatch.

When a player reaches Level 5 they also have the opportunity to unleash their Pokémon on 'gyms' – normally located at real-life local places of interest – to do battle with other people's Pokémon characters. The people need to be at or near the same real world location.

What are Pokémon gyms and Pokéstops?

The gym is where players (known as 'trainers') go to teach their captured Pokémon to fight. At Pokéstops, trainers can pick up snacks and medicine for their captives.

The 'real life' location of these gyms and Pokéstops is likely to be a public place of interest – such as churches, shopping malls, water towers, museums etc. This is because the game was designed around geo-location technology and looking at what people have frequently typed into mapping apps.

Sometimes landscapes change quicker than technology can allow for, however, and there have been reports of players lured to inappropriate places of interest such as [sex shops](#) - and of [people living in converted churches](#) complaining that their properties have been surrounded by hoardes of gamers.

One US teen even stumbled across a [dead body](#) when searching for a water-based **Pokéstop** near Wyoming's Big Wind River.

Who do players interact with?

There's no built-in chat function but the game does encourage you to interact with other players in 'the wild' and gamers are highly likely to encounter other real life people trying to get supplies from the same Pokéstop battling at their local 'gym' or just wandering around catching Pokemon in the same area.

Is there an age limit for players?

You have to be 13 or over to download the app, according to the app's terms and conditions. In the US privacy legislation requires parents of under-13s to sign permission before any data about their children can be collected.

Is it free?

It's possible to enjoy the game without making a single in-game purchase. However, as players progress they might require PokéCoins, the in-game currency of Pokémon Go, and this is how its makers look set to make a healthy return on their investment.

Players use PokéCoins to buy useful items, such as Poké Balls, which are needed to actually catch Pokémon.

There are ways to earn coins within the flow of the game, but the quickest way is to shell out the cash. In-app purchases: 79p for 100 PokéCoins to £79.99 for 14,500 coins.

Is it available in the UK?

Yes, the game is now available in the UK via Apple's iOS and Google Play's app stores.

What do parents need to be concerned about?

- The general lack of awareness players have for the world around them has led to [accidents](#) - running into things, falling and wandering into hazardous places.
- You need a Google account to sign up to play the game and there have been [reports](#) that the app is automatically granting itself permission to access people's Gmail and Google Drive accounts, which could leave them open to hackers. The level of permission required is currently being tweaked by Niantic, the game's makers.
- Security experts have spotted a malicious version of the Pokémon Go Android app that has been infected with a remote access tool that gives attackers [full control over the victim's phone](#).
- There have been [reports](#) of muggers using the app to lure victims. The immersive nature of the game may make some players more trusting of strangers if they are fellow gamers, but children still need to apply the same safety rules that they would use for online gaming.

Is it safe?

A game that makes children exercise and talk to each other and one that adds a fresh perspective to familiar surroundings shouldn't be demonised. But you need to ensure that your child is aware of the dangers before playing and remain safe while using it. There are some aspects of the game that many parents will want to talk to their child about before deciding if they will let them play it.

Parent Zone has not reviewed the game in an official capacity but here are some tips gathered from parents who have already played the game:

- Give it a try yourself, or walk around with your child while they play it and ask them questions. If you are both playing together it could be fun!
- If they want to venture out without you, make sure they do so with a friend or friends.
- Let them know that they don't have to walk around while staring at the map on the screen. So long as the game is open on their phones they can hold their mobile in their hand or even put it in their pocket while they walk. If a wild Pokémon appears in their immediate area, the phone will vibrate to let them know.
- Let them know that you don't have to visit a Pokémon's exact location to capture it – you can stop at a nearby area where it's safe (ie not in the middle of a busy junction). So long as it appears on their game map, they can capture it.
- As with online gaming aliases, remind your child to choose a username that won't identify either them or where they live. If your child captures a 'gym' their username will appear and anyone in the area who touches the gym to see the details of who is in control of it will see it.
- Apply real world caution when visiting Pokéstops and gyms. Your child might make some new friends at these place – as they might in a shopping centre, park or cinema, but they need to be aware of the dangers. Make sure you know where your child is going who they will be accompanied by or, even better, offer to take them there yourself.

- Be wary of 'lures'. There is an item called a 'lure' that players can purchase with in-game tokens. They drop it at a Pokéstop and Pokémon are lured to that stop for around 30 minutes. You can tell when someone has dropped a lure at a stop because it will have confetti flying out of it on the map. There is the potential to capture lots of Pokémon, but this feature basically gives people the power to lure a group of kids to a certain spot for 30 minutes, so you'll need to use your judgement and set rules with your child about how to handle this situation if it occurs.
- Remind them to save some phone battery for the journey home. The game uses a lot of a phone's power and will run out of battery faster than normal. Make sure they check their battery level and start heading back when it's low. There's a battery saving mode in the game settings, which will dim the screen and use fewer resources while they are walking around.

Additional information taken from http://hitechmom.com/pokemon-go-guide-parents-dangers/

This article was updated on 14 July 2016 to confirm the game is now available in the UK and add in the UK price for in-app purchases and on 21 July 2016 to include the price of 14,500 coins. Image: YouTube