GAMING SYSTEMS CAN EXPOSE CHILDREN TO RISKS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, OUR PARENTS WARNED us not to talk to strangers. That important rule applies at the local playground and in our neighborhood. Today, children are more likely to frequent a digital playground that can be even more dangerous.

For example, many game systems have evolved dramatically and now have many of the same capabilities as home computers. In particular, these games' online interfaces allow users to interact with each other using text, voice or even video chat. Parents should beware of the potential for child predators to use these systems to prey upon and contact their children.

Video game systems typically have parental control features that can be used to restrict game features that bear increased risks. These controls allow a parent to:

- Enable or disable a game console's chat features or manage with whom and how a user can communicate and play;
- Enable or disable Web browsing;
- Permit or block access to online games;
- Restrict games based on maturity ratings;
- Restrict the amount of time a game console may be played (per day or per week); and
- Restrict purchases of games or add-ons from manufacturer's online store.

While these features are designed to give parents peace of mind, many kids have the technological knowledge to bypass controls. So even the best controls do not replace adult supervision.

Nonetheless, parents should carefully consider whether to enable their gaming system's chatting feature. Parents who choose to allow chat should teach their children to closely guard and protect their "friend code" or game user name. During online conversations, child predators may look for clues that reveal a child's physical location. Children should also be strongly cautioned against discussing anything personal while playing online games with people they do not know.

As with computers, game consoles should be kept in a common area of the home. Parents should also consider participating in their children's game-playing activities.

Hand-held gaming devices also pose potential risks to children. Many of these devices have wireless-communication capabilities and are popular among kids who use them to communicate with others who are within range, usually about 30 feet. Child predators may be able to exploit this feature in certain public settings.

Texans should be aware that not all games are appropriate for children of all ages. Most video games come with a rating that indicates age appropriateness.

These ratings are assigned by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a self-regulatory body that rates computer and video game content; enforces industry-adopted advertising guidelines; and helps ensure responsible online privacy practices for the interactive entertainment software industry.

ESRB ratings help parents determine which games are appropriate for their children. The ratings are incremental from "early childhood" through "adult only" and offer content descriptions that explain the games' themes, language, violence or sexual content. In addition to using the ESRB guide, parents should consider their child's maturity and personality when selecting games for them.

Although most parents take steps to reduce the threat of accessible, unsuitable content on their home computers, many do not realize that the same Internet content can be accessed with a game console. Current game systems are Internet capable, which means kids can use them to browse potentially inappropriate material on the Web.

Parents who believe their child has been contacted by a sexual predator should try to preserve the record of the communication and report it to their local police department or to the OAG Cyber Crimes Unit. For more information about cyber safety, visit www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.