



STRINGS ATTACHED
UK · NO. 01 · OCTOBER 2026

Strings attached

What the UK's most popular kids' games come with

We took a look at the most popular kids' games on Google Play and checked every listing against a simple No Strings test: no ads, no purchases, no data sharing and no account data.

[The No Strings test →](#)

[What you can do](#)

THE HEADLINE

9 in 10



of the most popular kids' games
come with strings attached

Only 12 of 121 pass all four checks



01

THE BIG PICTURE

Let's start with one simple test

What would a game with no strings attached look like? No ads, no purchases, no data sharing and no account data. We checked all 121 listings.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 03 The No Strings test
- 04 Did you know?
- 05 Nine in ten come with strings attached
- 06 The most common string: purchases
- 07 String-free games are rare



The No Strings test

Four checks on every listing. A game passes only if all four are true.

Each check a game fails is a string attached

CHECK ONE

No ads

50% fail



The listing does not declare ads: no "Contains ads" label.

CHECK TWO

No purchases

78% fail



No in-app purchases (subscriptions included) and nothing to pay to download.

CHECK THREE

No data sharing

34% fail



The Data safety section declares no data shared with third parties.

CHECK FOUR

No account data

26% fail



No email address, name, user ID or phone number collected for an account.

121 games, one dot each

● 109 carry at least one string ● 12 pass all four



Only 12 of 121 of the most popular kids' games pass all four. No Strings is our own test, not a safety rating.



WHAT THE MOST POPULAR KIDS' GAMES COME WITH

Did you know?

Only 12 of 121 pass our No Strings test, and 10 of those come from one developer.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

None of this is hidden. It is all on the listing, if you know where to look.

Tap a number to see the detail

90%

Come with at least one string attached

109 of 121 kids' games [p.05](#) →

84%

Charge for something, though 98% are free to download

102 of 121 kids' games [p.09](#) →

72%

Of games built on a famous character or brand describe a subscription

Other kids' games: [p.15](#) 22% →

19%

Of "ad-free" games carry Google's Contains ads label

8 of 42 games [p.17](#) →

30%

Declare collecting or sharing location data

36 of 121 kids' games [p.21](#) →

35%

Of games holding data say it can't be deleted

30 of 85 games [p.22](#) →

50%

Of the lowest-rated reviews of the top earners mention payment

Other games: [p.25](#) 25% →

6.0

Years old: the typical popular kids' game

Other top games: [p.28](#) 3.2 →



THE NO STRINGS TEST

Nine in ten come with strings attached

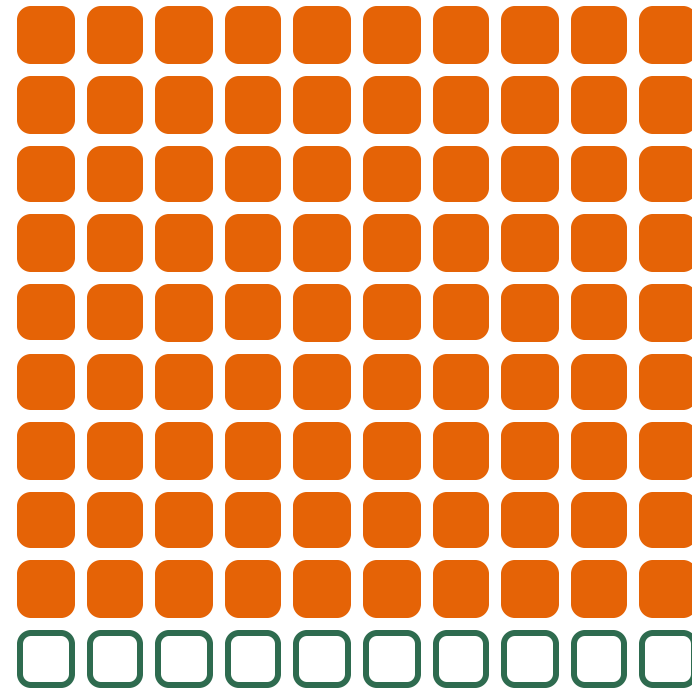
109 of 121 of the most popular kids' games fail the No Strings test: their own listings show at least one string attached.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

A string is not always bad. But it is worth knowing which ones a game comes with before your child starts playing.

Kids' games with at least one string

F01



90%

carry at least one string
109 of 121

- 90% carry at least one string
- 10% carry none

121 kids' games. One square is roughly one in a hundred.



HOW OFTEN EACH STRING COMES UP

The most common string: purchases

94 of 121 kids' games charge for a download or sell in-app purchases. Half declare ads, a third declare sharing data with third parties and a quarter collect account data.

Most carry more than one: **86 of 121 have two strings or more.**

Kids' games carrying each string

F02

Purchases

94/121 **78%**

Ads

61/121 **50%**

Data sharing

41/121 **34%**

Account data

31/121 **26%**

121 kids' games.



THE GAMES THAT PASS, AND WHO MAKES THEM

String-free games are rare

Just 12 of 121 of the most popular kids' games pass the No Strings test, and 10 of those 12 come from a single developer.

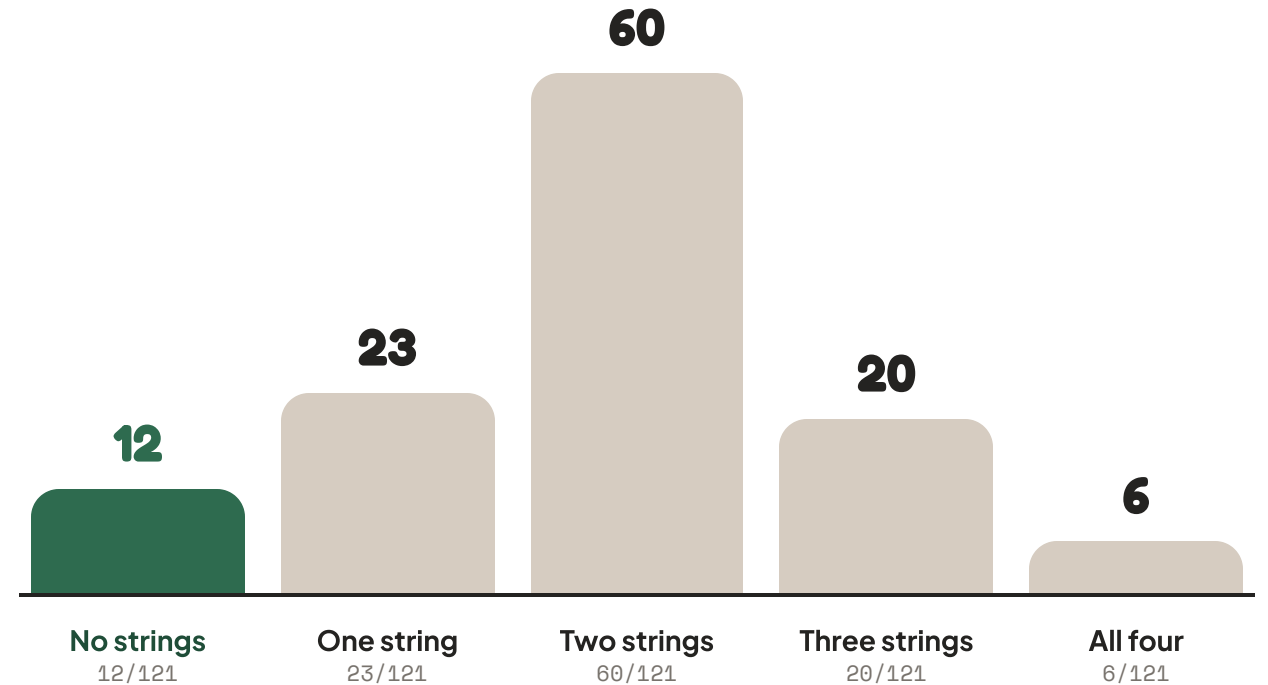
Take that one developer away and 2 of 111 are string-free. Among other top games, not one passes.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

String-free games exist, but you have to look for them.

Kids' games by how many strings they carry

F03



121 kids' games. Number of games.



02

MONEY

Free to download... so where does the money come in?

Almost every game here costs nothing to install. Here's what the listings say happens after that.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 09 Free to download. Then the bill.
- 10 From free to £99.99
- 11 £99.99 for one item
- 12 102 of 121 have a way to pay



WHAT THE LISTINGS CHARGE

Free to download. Then the bill.

Almost every popular kids' game costs nothing to download: 119 of 121. But 102 of 121 charge for something: in-app purchases, a paid download or a membership bought outside Google Play.

🏠 WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

The "In-app purchases" label under the title is the giveaway. A free download with that label will ask for money later.

KIDS' GAMES · THE LISTING

Free to download 119 of 121

98%

Then charge for something 102 of 121

84%

"Charge" means in-app purchases, a paid download, or a membership bought outside Google Play.



HOW FAR THE PRICES GO

From free to £99.99

98% of the most popular kids' games cost nothing to download. 84% then charge for something, 76% sell in-app purchases, 25% list an item at £50 or more, and 8% list one at £99.99 or more.

Across the kids' games selling in-app purchases, the median cheapest item is **£1.79** and the median most expensive is **£39.99**.

These are the prices on the listing, not what families spend.

From free download to the most expensive item

F04

Are free to download 119/121 **98%**



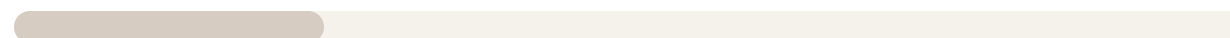
Charge for something 102/121 **84%**



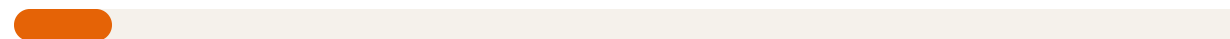
Sell in-app purchases 92/121 **76%**



List an item at £50 or more 30/121 **25%**



List an item at £99.99 or more 10/121 **8%**



121 kids' games.



THE MOST EXPENSIVE ITEM EACH GAME LISTS

£99.99 for one item

Of the 92 kids' games that sell in-app purchases, 30 list something at £50 or more, and 10 list a single item at £99.99 or more.

The top earners charge more. Among kids' games in top grossing lists, the median most expensive item is £49.99; in top free lists it is £36.99.

🏠 WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

The price range sits under "In-app purchases" on the listing. Check the top of the range before handing over a device.

Kids' games selling in-app purchases, by their most expensive item

F05



92 kids' games selling in-app purchases.



HOW KIDS' GAMES CHARGE

102 of 121 have a way to pay

Most charge through in-app purchases: 92 games sell them, and on Google Play that includes subscriptions. Another 8 need a membership bought outside Google Play, and 2 cost money to download.

Only one in six (19 games) has no payment built in at all: no in-app purchases, no subscription, no paid download and no outside membership.

How the most popular kids' games charge

F06



 In-app purchases

92 games

 Membership bought elsewhere

8 games

 Paid download

2 games

 No payment built in

19 games

121 kids' games. Each game is counted once.



03

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Then there's the **monthly fee**

Some games don't just sell items. Their listings describe a subscription, a membership or a free trial, and it's far more common in games built on a famous character or brand.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 14** A third describe a subscription
- 15** 72% of character games describe a subscription



AND IT CLIMBS WITH THE BIG NAMES AND THE TOP EARNERS

A third describe a subscription

39 of 121 kids' game listings describe a subscription, membership or free trial. Among other top games it is 6 of 224.

Among the top earners it is 21 of 35, and among games built on a famous character or brand, 18 of 25.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

Search the description for "subscription", "membership" and "free trial" before you download.

Listings that describe a subscription or membership

F07

Kids' games built on a famous character or brand

18/25 **72%**



Kids' games in top grossing lists

21/35 **60%**



All kids' games

39/121 **32%**



Other top games

6/224 **3%**



Subscription, membership or free trial described on the listing.



GAMES BUILT ON A FAMOUS CHARACTER OR BRAND

72% of character games describe a subscription

18 of 25 kids' games built on a licensed character or brand describe a subscription or membership. For other kids' games it is 21 of 96: the character games do so more than three times as often.

Counting only a game's own subscription or a publisher's bundle, it is 14 of 25 against 17 of 96. The data shows the pattern, not the reason for it.

Character games and other kids' games

F08

■ Famous character or brand ■ Other kids' games

Describes a subscription or membership

+50 pts



Describes its own or a bundle subscription

+38 pts



Sells in-app purchases

no clear gap



Kids' games with and without a licensed character or brand in the title.



04

ADS

It says ad-free. Does it?

What a game's description promises, against the label Google puts on the listing. And the data the ads run on.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 17 Says ad-free. The label says Contains ads.
- 18 Two in five declare using data for advertising



THE DESCRIPTION AGAINST THE LABEL

Says ad-free. The label says Contains ads.

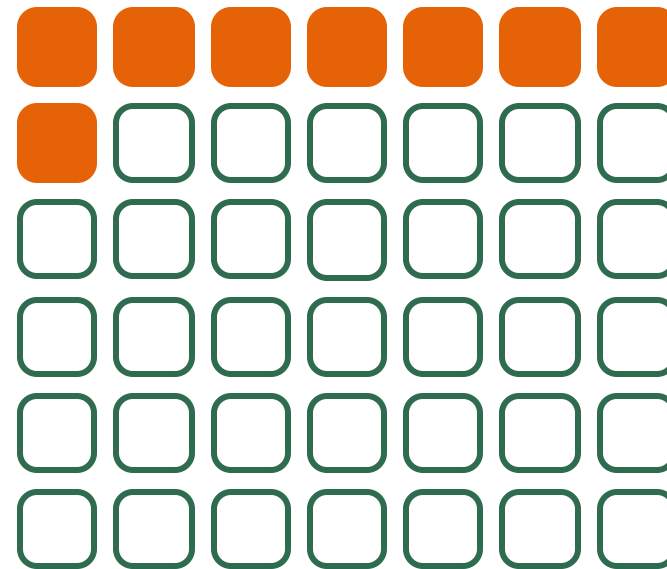
42 of 121 kids' game descriptions say the game has no ads or is ad-free. Yet 8 of those 42 also carry Google's "Contains ads" label, which comes from what the developer declares to Google.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

The description is the developer's sales pitch. Read the labels under the title, not only the description.

"Ad-free" kids' games: the Contains ads label

F09



19%

also carry the Contains
ads label
8 of 42

Orange square: 19% also carry the Contains ads label

Green square: 81% no Contains ads label

42 kids' games whose description says no ads or ad-free. One square per game.



ADS, AND THE DATA BEHIND THEM

Two in five declare using data for advertising

61 of 121 of the most popular kids' games declare ads. 48 of 121 declare that data they collect or share is used for advertising or marketing, and 28 of 121 declare sharing device identifiers for advertising.

A device identifier lets an ad network recognise the same device across different apps.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

The Data safety section on the listing says what each game uses data for, including advertising.

Ads and advertising data in kids' games

F10

Ads

61/121 **50%**



Using data for advertising or marketing

48/121 **40%**



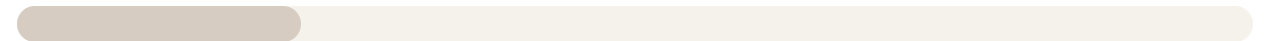
Sharing device or other IDs

38/121 **31%**



Sharing device IDs for advertising

28/121 **23%**



121 kids' games.



05

DATA

Now for the part you can't see

What games say they collect from the device, who they share it with, and whether it can be deleted.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 20** One in five declare collecting data about the device's apps
- 21** 30% declare collecting location data
- 22** 35% say the data can't be deleted
- 23** Signed up to Google's family rules. Still sharing data.



INSTALLED APPS

One in five declare collecting data about the device's apps

25 of 121 kids' games declare collecting information about the apps installed on the device: more than twice the rate among other top games (9%).

The declaration does not say which apps a game can see: on current Android versions an app sees only a limited set of other apps unless Google Play allows it more.

21%

of kids' games declare collecting information about the apps installed on the device

Kids' games	25 of 121
Other top games	19 of 223

"Installed apps" is a data type in the App activity part of Google Play's Data safety section.



WHAT KIDS' GAMES DECLARE COLLECTING OR SHARING

30% declare collecting location data

36 of 121 of the most popular kids' games declare collecting or sharing location data. None declares precise location: this is approximate location, such as the town or city.

75 of 121 declare collecting some kind of data, and 31 of 121 collect account data: an email address, name, user ID or phone number.

🏠 WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

The Data safety section lists each kind of data a game says it collects, and whether it is shared.

What kids' games declare collecting or sharing

F11

Any data at all

75/121 **62%**

Location

36/121 **30%**

Account data

31/121 **26%**

Installed apps

25/121 **21%**

121 kids' games.



OF THE GAMES HOLDING DATA

35% say the data can't be deleted

Of the 85 kids' games that declare collecting or sharing any data, 30 carry the label "Data can't be deleted". 45 say you can ask for it to be deleted, and 10 say neither. Among other top games holding data, 21% say it can't be deleted.

The label is the developer's own answer. UK data protection law gives people rights over their data either way.

Kids' games holding data: what the listing says about deletion

F12



- You can ask for it to be deleted 53% · 45 of 85
- Data can't be deleted 35% · 30 of 85
- Neither 12% · 10 of 85

85 kids' games declaring any data.



GAMES COMMITTED TO THE PLAY FAMILIES POLICY

Signed up to Google's family rules. Still sharing data.

114 of 121 kids' games commit to Google Play's Families Policy. Of those, 41 of 114 declare sharing data with third parties, 28 of 114 declare sharing device identifiers for advertising, and 61 of 114 declare ads.

The policy allows this. Ads in apps for children have to come through ad software that its makers self-certify under Google's Families Self-Certified Ads SDK Program. Following the rules still leaves room for ads and data sharing.

Kids' games committed to the Families Policy: what they declare

F13

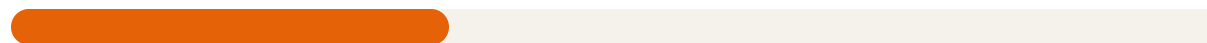
Ads

61/114 **54%**



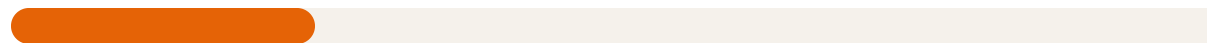
Sharing data with third parties

41/114 **36%**



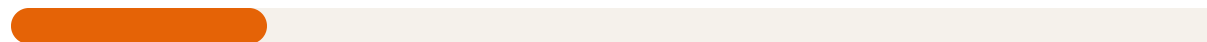
Sharing device identifiers for advertising

28/114 **25%**



Collecting account data

24/114 **21%**



114 kids' games committed to the Play Families Policy.



06

REVIEWS

What do the **one-star** reviews say?

We read the newest low ratings twice: first for the top-earning kids' games, then for every kids' game in the study. Either way, one topic comes up more than any other.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 25** The top earners: half of the worst reviews mention payment
- 26** All kids' games: money still comes first



TOP EARNERS ONLY: KIDS' GAMES IN TOP GROSSING LISTS

Among the top earners, half of the worst reviews mention payment

Among the newest 1–2★ reviews of kids' games in top grossing lists, 734 of 1,469 mention payment: twice the rate for other games in those lists (25%).

Mentions of charges and refunds, and of a game not being really free, are more common too. Across all kids' games in the study, the figure is lower, at 28% (next page).



50%

of the newest 1–2★ reviews of
kids' games in top grossing lists
mention payment

Kids' games	734/1,469 reviews
Other games in those lists	25%

Reviews using words such as pay, price, buy, premium, unlock or "£". A mention is not a verified complaint.



ALL 120 KIDS' GAMES, NOT JUST THE TOP EARNERS

Across all kids' games, money still comes first

Across the newest 1–2★ reviews of the most popular kids' games, 28% mention payment: more than any other topic. Ads come next at 10%, then technical problems at 7%. Among the top earners alone, payment rises to 50% (previous page).

Only 7% of these reviews carry a sign of a parent writing, so we don't call them parents' reviews.

The newest 1–2★ reviews of kids' games: what they mention

F14

Payment

1,094/3,930 **28%**

Ads

394/3,930 **10%**

Technical problems

263/3,930 **7%**

Not really free

185/3,930 **5%**

Data or accounts

143/3,930 **4%**

Charges and refunds

82/3,930 **2%**

3,930 reviews of 120 kids' games. A review can mention more than one topic. A mention is a keyword match, not a verified complaint.



07

THE GAMES

So who's behind these games?

How old they are, how they're rated, and how few developers make so many of them.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 28 The most popular kids' games are old
- 29 Lower ratings, and fewer reviewers
- 30 A few developers make many of them



HOW OLD THE GAMES ARE

The most popular kids' games are old

Half of the most popular kids' games came out more than 6.0 years ago; for other top games it is 3.2.

Only 12 of 121 came out this year or last, against 89 of 224 other top games.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

A game's age says nothing about its ads, purchases or data. The labels on the listing do.

6.0 years

the typical age of a popular kids' game

Kids' games

6.0 years



Other top games

3.2 years



Years since first release. The median: half are older, half are newer.



THE STARS ON THE LISTING

Lower ratings, and fewer reviewers

Kids' games collect a median of 1.9 ratings per thousand installs; other top games, 19.4. The stars on a kids' game rest on far fewer voices.

Their ratings are lower too: a median of 4.2 stars, against 4.5. And 11 of 120 kids' games have at least three in ten of their ratings at one star, against 1 of 222 other top games.

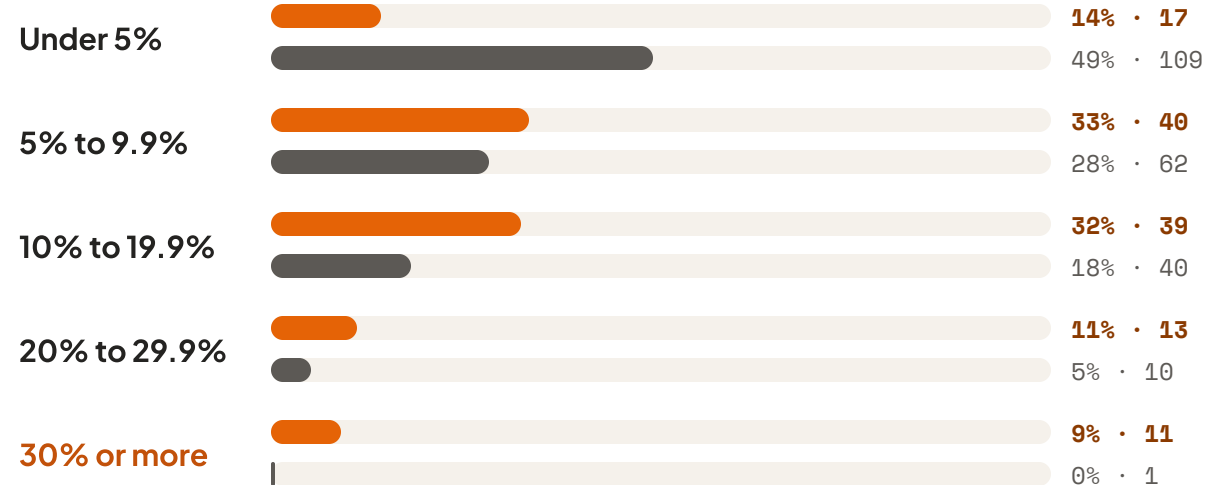
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

Read a few of the one-star reviews, not just the average.

Share of lifetime ratings that are one star

F15

Kids' games (of 120) Other top games (of 222)



Kids' games, with other top games for comparison.



WHO MAKES THE GAMES

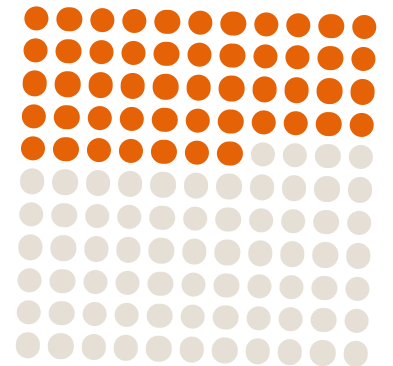
A few developers make many of them

The 121 most popular kids' games come from 53 developers. The largest makes 10 of 121, the largest three make 25 of 121 and the largest eight make 51 of 121.

25 are built on a famous character or brand.

51 of 121

popular kids' games come from just eight developers



Developers: **53**

The largest makes: **10 of 121**

Developer accounts. One dot per game.



08

IN FAIRNESS

Now, to be fair...

Kids' games aren't the worst on Google Play. On several counts, they do better than other top games.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 32 In fairness: where kids' games do better



KIDS' GAMES AGAINST OTHER TOP GAMES

In fairness: where kids' games do better

Kids' games are not worse than other games on every count. Against other top games, fewer charge for anything, fewer declare sharing data, using data for advertising or collecting location, and far fewer show "Includes Random Items", the label for loot boxes.

Only 2 of 121 let players interact with each other, against 29% of other top games. More declare that data is encrypted, and their developers reply to more negative reviews.

The story is not that kids' games are the worst on Google Play. It is how few come with no strings at all.

Kids' games against other top games

F16

■ Kids' games ■ Other top games

Charges for a download or in-app purchases

-18 pts



Sharing data with third parties

-31 pts



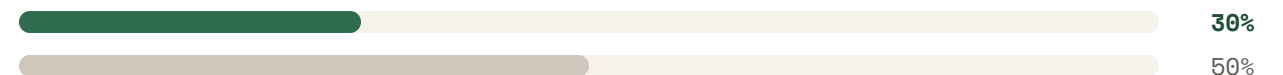
Using data for advertising or marketing

-28 pts



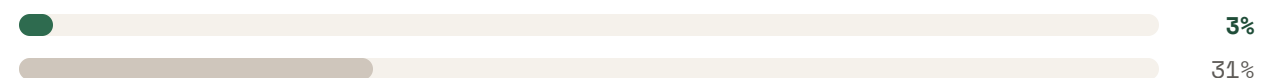
Collecting or sharing location

-20 pts



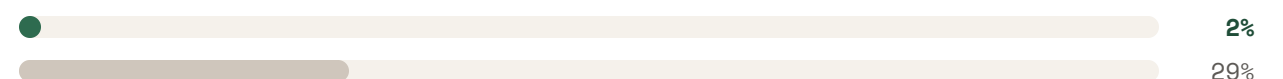
Includes Random Items (loot boxes)

-27 pts



Users Interact

-27 pts





09

WHAT YOU CAN DO

So, now what? Here's what you can do.

You don't need to install a game to check it. Everything you need is already on its Google Play listing.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- 34 Four checks before you download
- 35 The bottom line



Four checks before you download

Each check uses what Google Play already shows on a game's listing. None needs the game installed.

Two minutes, before you tap Install

1

Turn on purchase approval

Google Play settings

In Google Play's settings, require authentication for every purchase, or use Family Link so a parent approves each one. **84% of kids' games here charge for something.**

2

Read the labels under the title

Contains ads · In-app purchases

50% of kids' games declare ads and 76% sell in-app purchases.
The price range shows the most expensive item.

3

Search the description

subscription · membership · free trial

32% of kids' game listings describe a subscription or membership.

4

Open the Data safety section

sharing · location · deletion

34% of kids' games declare sharing data with third parties, and 35% of those holding data say it can't be deleted.



Free to download doesn't mean free of strings.

9 in 10

of the most popular kids' games come with at least one string attached

84%

charge for something, though almost all are free to download

12 of 121

pass all four checks. String-free games exist, but you have to look for them.

None of this is hidden. Every string in this report is written on the game's own Google Play listing. Now you know where to look, and what to check before your child taps Install.

ONE LAST THING

Check the next listing together. It takes two minutes, and it helps your child spot the strings too.



Pumpkin Cat Games

Wholesome classic games, made for little hands.

pumpkincatgames.com

Pumpkin Cat Games makes a kids' games app, one app with several classic games inside, so we have an interest in this market. Our app is not counted in this study. Every number comes from the games' own Google Play listings.

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