

Video and computer games have become a basic part of kids' lives: nearly all youth play electronic games at least occasionally. Many parents, though, feel they don't know enough about the games their children are playing, and worry about the role gaming plays in their children's lives. Fortunately, there are steps parents can take to make sure that video games are a healthy part of their kids' lives, and a fun part of family life as well.



The positive aspects of video games

- Because game playing is nearly universal among children, especially boys, it provides an opportunity to find common ground with other children when socializing. Many young boys report that it is one of the most common topics of conversation when meeting new people.
- Games can help kids develop skills in areas such as reading, and math as well as learning problem-solving skills and collaboration.
- They can serve to make children more comfortable with technology and encourage self-esteem; in some cases they may encourage civic participation, or participation in related offline activities such as reading or sports.
- There is some evidence that multi-player video games can help build empathy in children.
- Of course video games offer what all good games provide – an opportunity for entertainment and socialization.

Choosing Good Video Games for Your Kids

- Think about your children's interests when looking for games. Are they interested in sports, fantasy or strategy-style games?
- Talk to other parents for advice and suggestions of good games, read gaming magazines and check out some of the great game review sites for parents on the Internet.

- Find games that have the appropriate Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating for your child's age. Keep in mind that the ratings are guidelines and every child is different. Even games with the "Everyone" rating may contain content that some children find frightening.
- Look for games that are challenging and exciting without being violent. Video game manufacturers create games that satisfy players' need to feel powerful and in control. Try to find games that offer kids thrills and the chance to experience control in a non-violent way.
- Find games that require strategy and problem-solving skills. If they have an educational component, that's a bonus.
- When choosing games for girls, look for ones that have strong, non-stereotypical female characters.
- Video games are expensive, so make sure a game has good play value before you buy. If possible, try the game first by borrowing or renting it. Ask for an in-store demo, and make sure you can return the game if you are not satisfied.
- Look for games that involve two players, to encourage cooperative play and to make game-playing a social activity.

Tips for Managing Video Game Playing in Your Home

Show your kids that you are genuinely interested in their video game playing by becoming actively involved:

- Play video games with your kids as much as possible, particularly when they're young. This lets you become aware of what your kids are playing and shows them that you are interested in their activities.
- Always play new games as soon as you buy them, especially if you're unsure of the content. (Be aware that some games become more violent as you play them longer, so be prepared to invest some time in playing these games with your kids.)



- Buy games that more than one person in the family will enjoy—especially when your children are young. This gets kids used to the idea of gaming as a communal, rather than a solitary pastime, and encourages game playing as a family activity.
- Talk to your kids from an early age about what kind of content you find objectionable, and why some games may not be appropriate for them. When you do encounter inappropriate content, be sure to discuss it with your kids.
- Encourage critical thinking in your children about video game content. Discuss with kids events or story lines in games would be how believable if they happened in real life. Challenge stereotypes when you see them and encourage your children to do the same.
- If excessive playing is an issue, control the amount of time your children play. Banning game playing outright is not a realistic option as gaming is an important part of kids' lives. (If you put limits on how long a gaming session can last, keep in mind that many games take a certain amount of time to finish.)
- Remember that while a new game will completely consume your kids, the novelty will pass and other pursuits will eventually hold more appeal.
- If possible, have your computer or video game console in a public area of your house so you can closely monitor what your kids are playing.
- Look for opportunities to encourage your children to participate in offline activities as well. For instance, if your child enjoys fantasy role-playing games, introduce him to fantasy novels; if he enjoys sports games, encourage him to play sports offline as well.

Special issues for young children

- Young children have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy which makes them more vulnerable to frightening and violent media content. As computer graphics and special effects become more realistic this becomes more of a concern.



Strategies

Always sit with young children when they are playing games so you will know what they find frightening. As they get older look for games which offer non-violent ways of solving conflicts and problems. (Many "action" games allow players to succeed through stealth or careful planning instead of through violence; a good game review site will steer you towards these.)



- Children often have easy access to age-inappropriate games through siblings and friends.

Strategies

Talk to your older kids and to the parents of your children's friends so they are aware of the rules you have for the games your children can play.

- Many young children play free online games, which are not rated by the ESRB. Some of these games may contain content that is not appropriate for young children.

Strategies

Be especially aware of what sites your child is visiting online and what games they are playing.

Special issues for teens

- The amount of time teens spend playing games can be an issue, especially if they play online role-playing games or multiplayer games.

Strategies

Keep in mind that it is normal for young people to throw themselves enthusiastically into hobbies. Consider the role your teen's gaming plays in his or her life: is he or she socializing less with friends? Are his or her grades declining? Is his or her sleep or general health being affected? If you have serious concerns about the impact of game playing on your teen's health, then you should consider seeking professional counselling.

- Multiplayer online games are very popular with teens. While many of the interactions teens have with other players are positive, bullying and inappropriate language are not uncommon. As well, some players of these games, known as "griefers", intentionally seek out opportunities to harass others, especially new players.