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insights

Video Games: the good, the bad and getting the balance right

by Martine Oglethorpe

Video games tend to get a bad rap from parents and the media. There's the fear of your child being locked away in their room for hours on end, inhabiting a virtual world that removes them from family, friends, school work and anything resembling reality. Then there is the fear of what someone might do following a session of first-person shooting, blowing up cars and taking out snipers with an AK47. Not to mention the seemingly wasted hours spent staring at a screen.

Without doubt there is some substance to some of the fears around gaming obsessions and violent behaviours. However, like many elements of the modern world, the negative impacts are often affecting only a very small minority and often these are in the extreme.

It is safe to say that many, many young people can play video games in a way that benefits their physical, social and emotional wellbeing. Like most things, when game playing is done with balance and perspective, it can actually be a most productive way for a young person to spend their time.

The benefits of video games

Cognitive and physical benefits. There are lots of great skills developed when playing video games. Analysing, thinking, problem solving, creating, team work and collaboration form the backbone of many games. Spatial awareness and hand–eye coordination skills, many of which can be transferred to the real world, are an added benefit. Many workplaces and training institutes use games to simulate real-world situations and the medical field is increasingly using forms of gaming to help with physical and neurological disorders.

Social and emotional benefits. Many kids who struggle to fit in at school, or don't make the sports teams, often feel a real sense of belonging, connection and achievement when playing video games. For those who find it difficult to shine in mainstream environments, gaming can be a great way for them to boost their self-esteem and sense of identity in a space that offers comfort, connection and control.

Thinking outside the box. Many games encourage players to think outside the box, take risks and critically analyse a situation. There is a lot of trial-and-error required in many games and this helps to develop players' persistence in problem solving tasks as they strive to get to the next level, the next world or create the next big city.

Stress release. There is certainly an element of stress release that many games provide for young people. After a long day at school it can be a welcome relief to immerse yourself in a game that allows you to switch off a little.

Keeping it under control

Of course these benefits won't eliminate the concerns many parents have about game playing, especially of online games. So what are some things we can do as parents to help keep it under control?

Look at your individual child. Are they coming to the dinner table without a fight? Are they coming to the table without bringing their device? If they are struggling too much in any of these areas over a long period of time, it might be time to make some changes.

Come up with time limits together. Discuss together what you think is fair based on the need to ensure they are striking the right balance and have enough energy for their other pursuits. While your child is young, give them a warning ahead of when you want them stop so they have time to finish whatever they are creating or whatever level they are at in their game. This helps them to get better at regulating their time.

Play a game with your child. It is much easier to make rules and boundaries around something that you understand and that they know you understand. Play a game with your child to get a feel for what they enjoy about it, be witness to some of the skills they may be developing and enjoy some important bonding time with your child.

Remove headphones, particularly when younger children are playing online games with friends or where others are involved. That way you can have your ears pricked to any bullying, aggressive play or unwanted language.

So next time you are lamenting the time your child spends playing video games, remember that as long as you are able to come up with some rules and boundaries together, you will have a much better chance of keeping game playing healthy and beneficial. With the gaming industry growing rapidly and continually creating and providing for so many other industries, your child may well be working on the skills they'll need in their future career.

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