

Online Gaming

Over the last couple of decades, advancements in technology have changed the way in which youth are able to connect to video games. Not only have we seen innovations in game design and special effects but the need to be in the same room as a requirement for playing games with friends and others has been eliminated due to online gaming. An online game is a video game that is either partially or primarily played through the internet. They allow players to play in real time with other individuals. Games range from simple text-based environments to the incorporation of complex graphics and virtual worlds and can be played on a computer, game console, tablet or a smartphone.



There is conflicting research regarding the pros and cons of video gaming. For example, aside from being fun, online gaming can build friendships, encourage team work, enhance creativity and develop competency skills. At the same time, there are risks involved that parents should be aware of which include:

- Not all games are suitable for all ages
- Inappropriate or offensive language, aggressive behavior or bullying in games that allow text, voice or video communication with other users.
- Breaches of privacy- the risk of sharing personal information or meeting unknown fellow players outside of the game.
- Links to websites where content may not be suitable for young people.

Currently, one of the more popular online games is Fortnite Battle Royal. Despite the fact that Fortnite is made up of cartoon graphics, the violence has earned the game a rating of T (for Teen), meaning it is not advised for kids under the age of 13. Kids report there is a social draw to play Fortnite because they can play with a friend or a squad of friends. In this trending game, up to 100 players can battle to the death, with the winner being the last player standing. It is similar to another popular online game, Minecraft, in that part of the object of the game is construction. Players can build forts from materials they find in their environment and loot supplies and equipment from defeated players. While the game itself is free, watch out for in-game purchases that can add up quickly. Fortnite has been known to draw the attention of youth for long periods of time if not monitored. Finding a healthy balance of video gaming and other activities is important. A healthy allotment of screen time is one that doesn't disrupt developmentally important parts of a youth's life including:

- Seeing friends and interacting with them in real life.
- Participating in extracurricular activities.
- Keeping up with academic classes and doing homework.
- Building positive relationships with family members.
- Getting enough sleep.

Whether playing Fortnite or another gaming platform, it is advised that parents take time to be informed about the games their children are playing and the safety settings and features of the devices they are playing games on. Below are some online gaming tips that can help keep our youth safe.

- Pay attention to the age appropriate ratings of games. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) evaluates video and computer games and provides a rating system similar to film ratings so parents can make informed decisions about the appropriateness of each game.
- Explain to your children that they should not give out personal details to other players (last name, location, etc.)
- Tell your children that they should not meet other players offline unless accompanied by you.
- Monitor your children's activities on gameplay websites (better yet, play with them)
- Encourage and remind your child to report issues such as bullying, threatening or bad language, the display of unwanted content or invitations to meet outside the game.
- Cease communication or change your child's online ID if anything within the game or the way it evolves makes you feel uncomfortable.

References: www.common sense media.org; www.connectsafely.org; www.cyberwise.org; Pew Research Institute

The Importance of Sleep

Sleep is vital to our health and well-being. Sleep is particularly important for children and teens that are still developing and growing, yet many are not getting the recommended amount of sleep. Not getting enough sleep can cause serious consequences. Lack of sleep causes over 100,000 car accidents each year. Sleep deprivation can also cause individuals to overeat or eat unhealthy foods in excess, which can lead to weight gain and other health issues. Sleep deprivation has also been linked to mood disorders, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease and it can even shorten one's life expectancy (Harvard Medical School). Furthermore, lack of sleep can impact one's ability to focus, listen and learn (National Sleep Foundation). Children may become fussy or aggressive when they are tired and teens may be seen nodding off during the day. Despite its importance, many do not get enough sleep.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends 9-11 hours of sleep per night for children 6-13 years of age and 8-10 hours for teens 14-17 years of age. In reality only 15% of teens reported sleeping 8 ½ hours per night during the week. Everyone has an internal body clock that tells the body when to sleep and when to be awake. When puberty begins, a shift occurs in a teen's 24-hour internal clock called sleep phase delay. The sleep phase delay can make it difficult for teens to fall asleep. Instead of feeling sleepy around 9:00 pm, a teen's body may not begin to feel sleepy until closer to 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Teens then have to be up early for school, making it challenging to get the recommended nine hours of sleep. To make up for the lack of sleep, it is common for teens to sleep late on the weekends. Unfortunately, this confuses the body's internal clock and can make it difficult to sleep at the beginning of the new school week.



Children also can have difficulty sleeping. It can be difficult for some children to fall asleep without assistance from a parent. Having a bed time routine and demonstrating self-soothing techniques can help reduce the problem. Limiting snacks and drinks, especially those containing caffeine, in the evening can help reduce the need to go to the bathroom throughout the night and help children fall asleep more easily. TV programs or videos that are not age appropriate should be avoided in the evening. For children that want a parent to sleep with them, try to sit in a chair next to them and slowly move the chair closer to the door each evening to get the child used to sleeping on their own.

We often forget how important sleep is to our health, including our mental health. There is a strong connection between mental health disorders and sleep. Children and teens with sleep disturbances can actually have similar symptoms to those with ADHD (Child Mind Institute). Symptoms that sleep deprivation and ADHD share include difficulty concentrating, aggressive behavior, mood swings, hyperactivity and nervousness. Approximately 25-50% of children with ADHD also have sleep problems. NSF's 2006 Sleep in America poll found that 73% of teens that reported feeling sad or depressed did not get enough sleep at night. A study by Harvard Medical School found that many adolescents with generalized anxiety disorder had a difficult time falling asleep and often slept less. Insomnia can also be a risk factor for and worsen anxiety, depression and PTSD. Unfortunately, the connection between

mental health and sleep can create a vicious cycle. For example, anxiety can make it difficult for one to fall asleep, yet sleep deprivation can make anxiety worse. Finding a healthy balance is key.

Tips to improve sleep:

- Create a consistent nighttime routine. Try to stick to the same time each night.
- Make the bedroom a relaxing room by removing electronic devices, noises and other bright lights.
- Refrain from drinking caffeinated beverages after 4 pm
- Limit any naps to 1 hour
- Dim lights throughout the house in the evening
- Limit or avoid evening activities, especially activities that are intense or cause excitement.

Youth tend to have busy schedules between athletics, school and homework. It is important to help them create a schedule and prioritize time. Saving homework until right before bed can cause unnecessary stress. Youth will also need assistance limiting distractions, like electronic devices. It is tempting to engage in social media or video games instead of completing homework or getting ready for bed. Electronic devices contain an artificial blue light that can impact the body's internal clock and make it more difficult to fall asleep. It is best to avoid electronic devices an hour before bed. Helping youth create healthy bed-time routines can help their mental health as well as improve their overall health and well-being.

References:

<https://www.uclahealth.org/sleepcenter/sleep-and-children>

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/teens-and-sleep>

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<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/why-electronics-may-stimulate-you-bed>

Natural Disasters & Mental Health

Scientific research shows that severe weather happenings such as blizzards, flooding, tornadoes and hurricanes as well as droughts and severe heat waves are likely to occur more often and/or become more intense with climate change.

The impact of a natural disaster is often assessed by a handful of statistics: The number of deaths and injuries; the number of homes and businesses destroyed; the cost of cleanup and repair of damaged homes, streets and other property.

All too often, we overlook the significance of the emotional wreckage these natural disasters leave behind.

Even though a tornado has vanished into thin air and the sirens have stopped, or a torrential downpour of rain has ended and the flooding from it has receded, people continue to feel an immense amount of stress and anxiety related to the natural disaster that occurred in their community. After the headlines to these events swiftly fade from the media spotlight, the loss and grief people are left to cope with remains.

As stated earlier, we know severe climate and weather disasters can cause a considerable amount of stress and hardship for those directly and indirectly impacted by these events. In a recent report from the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change, they noted that natural disasters cause anxiety related responses that later on can become and/or lead to chronic and serious mental health disorders.

Here are some common reactions people have during and after a natural disaster has occurred:

- Disbelief & Shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disoriented & Confused
- Indecisive
- Trouble Concentrating
- Apathy
- Nightmares
- Preoccupied or Reoccurring Thoughts About the Event
- Irritability & Anger
- Sadness & Depression
- Feeling Powerless
- Changes in Eating Habits
- Crying Spells
- Somatic Problems (Headaches, Back Pains and Stomach & Digestive Problems)
- Changes in Sleep Patterns
- Increased Substance Use/Abuse

It should be no wonder that increased behavioral health services are desperately needed in the aftermath of a climate/weather related disaster. Yet the need for these services is compounded by the mere fact that many of the agencies and people who work in them have also been impacted which causes a disruption in the availability and/or accessibility of these services at a time when there is an increase in needed services.

If your school has a SCIP program, the SCIP team at the school or the regional SCIP coordinator maybe able to help students and families get connected to and coordinate with behavioral health services.

Young kids and teens tend to have greater effects related to natural disasters than adults and are more likely to have prolonged trauma-related symptoms after a disaster. Many kids are resilient and are able to cope and move forward in a healthy manner over time, if they receive the guidance and support they need to develop healthy coping strategies.

Here are some practical and useful tips adults and kids can also use to help them cope with a natural disaster.

- Talk About the Event. Talking with others about the event can help reduce stress and anxiety in knowing you are not alone.
- Spend Time and/or Stay Connected with Your Loved Ones.
- Get Enough Sleep & Rest.
- Exercise & Eat in a Healthy Manner.
- Reduce Caffeine as caffeine can intensify anxious feelings.
- Limit Exposure to Destructive Pictures & News Stories About the Event.
- Make Time for Fun & Healthy Activities, Like Going to a Movie or to the Gym. These can Help Take Your Mind Off the Disaster.
- Do One Thing at a Time. Being able to Check off Things off Your To Do List can Make Things Feel Less Overwhelming.

For more information on related topics of grief, ambiguous loss, depression etc., please visit SCIP's website www.scipnebraska.com.

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