

The Influence of Video Games on Youth

It's no secret that today's youth have a love of video games. Video gaming is a multibillion-dollar industry bringing in more money than movies and DVD's. While video games have been around for decades, they are much more sophisticated than the early days of Pac Man, Zelda and Super Mario Brothers. Today's video games engage youth both physically and emotionally as they become entwined in the realistic graphics, stories and adventures that make up some of today's playing experiences.



According to a national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 97% of young people play video games. The survey also found that young people are routinely able to get their hands on games that are rated "M" for mature or "AO" for adults only. While three quarters of parents who were surveyed said they "always" or "sometimes" check the ratings on their kids' games, half of the boys who were questioned listed a game with an "M" or "AO" rating as one of their favorites (compared to only 14% of girls).

When it comes to the impact that video games has on children and adolescents, many researchers are hesitant to label games as "good" or "bad" as multiple factors can influence how gaming impacts youth. For example, the type of games being played, the time that kids spend playing games as well as the setting in which they are playing (isolated or with others, online "friends" or face to face) can be influential factors in both positive and adverse impacts of video gaming. According to Pew researchers, how young people play a game is just as important as what they play. Likewise, it is recommended that parents take time to play the same games as their children are playing or even better, play with them.

According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, studies of children exposed to violent media (such as violent video games) have shown that they may become numb to violence, imitate the violence and show more aggressive behavior. However, it should be noted that aggressive behavior is linked to the amount of time kids are allowed to play (Journal of Adolescence). Additionally, younger children and those with emotional, behavioral or learning problems may be more influenced by violent images. According to the Center on Media and Child Health, research shows that video game violence can significantly increase anxiety and aggressive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in children over the long-term and short-term. Specifically, children who suffer from anxiety or other mental health issues may be more likely to suffer the adverse health effects that some video gaming can inflict. For example, youth who may already suffer from anxiety or depression can be adversely influenced by excessive video gaming when it leads to social isolation and fuels existing antisocial tendencies. Additionally, anxious children have a tendency to foster fear and worry about things or stories created in their head rather than focusing on reality. While gaming can give anxious children an escape from worry, it also removes them further from reality and can instill

unrealistic fears about their own safety. Likewise, video gaming can overstimulate the nervous system which can create even more fear in an already anxious child (Psychology Today).

Thus, while we should be cautious in not labeling all video gaming with a negative stereotype, parents should consider the individual characteristics of their children when considering video games, be mindful of what games their children are exposed to and the amount of time children spend engaging in the gaming world.

Tips for Parents:

- Know the rating of the video games your child plays (Video games are currently rated by the ESRB- The Entertainment Software Rating Board. Check out the ESRB Website for more details).
- Do not install video game equipment in your child's bedroom (playing video games before bed can disrupt sleep).
- Set limits on how often and how long your child is allowed to play video games.
- Monitor all your child's media consumption.
- Supervise your child's Internet Use- there are now many "video games" available to play online.
- Take the time to discuss with your children the games they are playing or other media they are watching. Ask your children how they feel about what they observe in these video games, television programs or movies.
- Share with other parents information about certain games or ideas for helping each other in parenting.

References: *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry; Journal of Adolescence; Pew Internet & American Life Project (Pew Research Center), The Center on Media and Child Health; Psychology Today; www.boystown.org*