

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Trying to keep up with new video games and video gaming systems can be overwhelming. It's easy for my first instinct as a parent to be "No!" For our family, though, I've found that taking the time to learn more about the games is important. The two articles written this month are more tools in my parenting arsenal when it comes to handling video game use in our family. May they help you as you try to navigate this tricky area as well.

—Nicole Balza

WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT VIDEO GAMES?

IN THE UNITED STATES, 90 to 99 percent of children play video games.¹ Is this a problem? Not necessarily. It has the *potential* to be a problem if gaming distracts us from the spiritual growth and service God intends for us. Signs point to gaming becoming more of a distraction:

- COVID-19 and its lockdowns increased gaming—a 63 percent increase in games sold.²
- In 2019 the World Health Organization recognized "Gaming Disorder" as a mental health condition. That's because the number of gamers who exhibit signs of addiction is growing.

WHAT IS SO ENTICING ABOUT GAMING?

Games have become more sophisticated and addictive. Developers have these goals in mind:

- **Thrill of accomplishment:** Most games involve controlling a character who improves and advances through the game. Players want to meet the next challenge, no matter how long it takes.
- **Thrill of discovery:** Curious humans are meant to explore and discover, and video games offer new worlds and layers to unlock and explore.
- **Fear of missing out:** Games continue even after a player has turned off the system, which leaves a player not wanting to sign out.
- **Connection to others:** Online role-playing games allow players to build relationships with other players. This online community becomes a place of safety, acceptance, and accomplishment—a powerful draw, especially if a player is not feeling those things in his or her real life.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT GAMING

Most students integrate gaming into other activities, for example, as a "breather" between their activities. In addition, gaming today has become less solitary and is

often shared with friends. Research has shown that gaming has benefits, such as teaching kids how to work as a team, prioritize, and recall concepts from memory. Gamers also develop good hand-eye coordination and spatial abilities. Some limited research suggests a carryover of these skills into non-video game activities.

VULNERABILITIES TO GAMING

When does gaming become a risk to your child's development?

The majority of video game players are over the age of 18, and these young adults tend to be experiencing the most harm from gaming. They often developed their addictions during the adolescent years. A key reason for parents to pay attention is to prevent the issues young adults experience when they are out on their own.

So what makes an adolescent vulnerable to misuse of video games? Video games are well-suited to fill a few voids:

- **Sense of powerlessness in life:** During gaming, players can become a hero, save a planet, catch the bad guy, command an army, or build the best city. They can feel powerful and skilled.
- **Social awkwardness and shyness:** In a game, players transform themselves to people who are socially confident, connected, and accomplished. Research shows that those who are socially unskilled want these things, and gaming is a place to find them.

Gaming can be positive if it provides a sense of accomplishment and connection. Problems occur when players only find a sense of identity in the gaming world and not in the world in which God has placed them. We are first and foremost children of God (1 John 3:1), called to love and serve those around us (Matthew 22:37-39). When gaming takes the place of living as God intended, it becomes a problem.

In the mental health field, we rarely count frequency or minutes to define an addiction. Rather, we look at the effects and consequences of the individual's behavior. Addiction is characterized by withdrawal from normal activities and responsibilities, inability to abstain, neglect and loss of relationships, and physical damage to oneself (such as sleep disturbances, migraines, eating irregularities, poor personal hygiene, etc.). Parents can watch for these warning signs that gaming is interfering with healthy identity formation and possibly becoming an addiction.

Here are some practical things concerned parents can do:

- Track gaming patterns using logs to record when the child plays and for how long.
- Limit screen time to one to two hours per day.
- Make gaming a weekend activity.

TO WRITE THIS article, I interviewed my boys. I asked, "What advice would you give parents who are concerned about video games?"

"Can we talk about this later, Dad? I'm playing Clash of Clans right now," said Josiah (12th grade). He gets his sense of humor from his dad.

But then he added, "Know what games they play." Good advice.

My sixth grader, Judah, said, "We should be allowed to play any games that aren't inappropriate—as long as we don't buy things in the app."

He's wise beyond his years. There's a lot of garbage out there. So my first bit of advice is: Make sure you know what your kids are playing and make sure you approve.

"Whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

LIMIT THEIR TIME

There are other issues beyond content. How much time are your children spending on games? Are there good things they could be doing but aren't? Homework? Physical exercise? Helping around the house?

"What would be a good daily limit?" I asked my boys. It's currently one hour a night after their homework is done. "Should you be allowed to play more?"

"No way!" my younger boys cried.

After I picked myself up off the floor, I asked, "Why not?"

"We wouldn't be smart. We would rot our brains," said Joel (third grade).

Judah added, "We wouldn't get our homework done.

- Keep gaming devices out of the child's bedroom.
- Most important: Identify underlying issues that may be pushing the child into the world of gaming. Keep in mind the vulnerabilities listed above. Are there self-esteem issues? Relationship issues? Anxiety? If these issues are present, create a plan for addressing them. Your plan might include spending more time together without screens; developing alternative interests; or seeking the help of a trusted pastor, teacher, coach, or Christian counselor.



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¹statista.com/statistics/748044/number-video-gamers-world
²statista.com/statistics/1109977/video-game-sales-covid

We wouldn't do our chores. We wouldn't go to bed on time. And we'd be tired and cranky all the time."

Josiah admitted with a sad tone, "Playing video games has destroyed my love for reading."

"Limit how much they play," said Jacob (10th grade). "On school days, I mean," he quickly added.

Too much time on video games can prevent our kids from living an "unwasted" life. So my second bit of advice: Limit time in front of screens.

"As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me" (John 9:4).

GUIDE THEM TOWARD CHRIST

Ultimately, you and I have wasted our time in frivolous pursuits. We have failed to do what is good and have sometimes lived a wasted life. We deserve nothing from God.

But Jesus? He always used his time wisely and gives us credit for it! He took the ways we've wasted our time onto himself and took them to the cross. We are forgiven!

Let's thank God for Jesus by using our time to his glory! And let's teach our children to do the same. Yes, it's okay to unwind from time to time. But let's also be about our Father's work! And let's model it for our kids. Let them clash their clans, but let's also teach them to serve their Savior in thanks for the way he first served us.



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