

Ask BYFS

November 2006

Parent Question: Are video games bad for kids?

BYFS Answer: This is a question not easily answered. Some important questions to ask are:

- What type of video games are my children playing?
- How long are they playing? and
- How is playing video games impacting their overall life?

Video games come in many styles and storylines. There are those like "Final Fantasy" that have the characters roaming through a storyline fighting bad-guys. These are called Role Play Games (RPGs) and have existed since before video games in such theatrical forms as "Dungeons and Dragons". Online, RPGs abound with chat rooms, instant messaging (IM) and formalized message boards where players can find each other and act out characters that they have created for every type of story imaginable from the latest Anime shows like "Inuyasha" to long-time favorites such as "X-Men" and "Lord of the Rings". Role play games can also delve into darker topics such as Vampirism, Horror, and the occult. There are then maze and puzzle games like Tetris that challenge our minds in a mathematical sense. There are sports games and "platform games" like Nintendo's "Super Mario" in which the main character runs and jumps through a series of obstacles. There are also shooting and fighting games like "Doom", "Mortal Combat", and the envelope-pushing "Grand Theft Auto".

Why does all of this matter? Because if adults don't take the time to understand the different forms that video games take and assume that one is similar to another, they are making a mistake akin to assuming that letting your child watch "ER" is the same as letting him or her watch "Teletubbies". Or even worse. One of the main debates surrounding video game content is that fact that those who are playing the game are not just passive observers - as they would be if they were watching a show - they are actual participants and, for example, are receiving the exact same brain responses and chemicals as if they were physically holding a gun and shooting another individual.

Fortunately, there are tools provided by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) similar to the movie ratings but much more comprehensive. Each video game has a rating assigned to it. Each video game box also has descriptors of exact content such as "gore", "violence", and "alcohol consumption". A rating guide is located at the end of this document.

The next thing to take into account is how long your child is playing the games. Researchers have found that video game addiction is becoming more common in our youth and warn that this needs to be monitored closely by parents. Video games are designed to continually reward the player with points, powers, and increasing challenges and this physically creates brain behavior that makes the individual want to keep playing to keep being rewarded. So, children aren't going to turn off the video games on their own accord unless they have an adult around to help them learn this type of self discipline. In fact, there is a growing trend among young adults of adult video game addiction in which it is difficult to hold a job, stay in college, or keep long-term relationships due to excessive gaming.

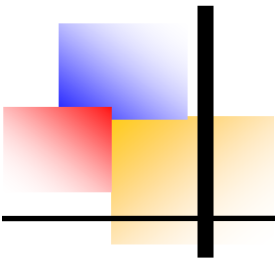
If you are not sure how much is too much, experts say spending more than 14 hours a week playing is one indicator of addiction. Other things to watch for are consistent preoccupation with the game, your child feeling lonely or upset when he or she isn't playing, becoming socially withdrawn, or an inability to participate in other activities such as outdoor games or homework because of this preoccupation.

In addition to video game addiction, researchers are also finding that playing video games - more than watching television - is a factor in childhood obesity. Put simply, kids are spending too much time in front of screens (television, computer, etc.) and not getting enough physical activity. So make sure that your child is getting a balance of activity.







Finally, some researchers are also beginning to recognize the powerful tool that video games can be. They encourage what is called "fluid intelligence" - this includes memory, learning, pattern recognition and problem solving. Children who play video games are exposed to constant decision-making scenarios which increase in complexity and this causes them to develop higher brain responses more quickly. In fact, some researchers are even speculating that the increasing IQ rates in our country may be due in part to the increasing popularity of video games with our youth.

So, the video game debate is a complex one and the most important thing a parent can do is be vigilant - and informed.

The BYFS is here to support and nurture the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children, adults, and families in Bedford. Email your questions to sueb@town.bedford.ma.us and the Bedford Youth and Family Services team (BYFS) will choose one to answer next month. Your name and email will remain confidential. Be sure to visit the BYFS website at <http://www.town.bedford.ma.us/youth/youthindex.html>.



ESRB Ratings

 <p>EC: Early Childhood Content may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.</p>	 <p>E: Everyone Content may be suitable for persons ages 6 and older. May contain minimal violence and some comic mischief or crude language.</p>
 <p>T: Teen Content may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.</p>	 <p>M: Mature 17+ Content may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. May contain mature sexual themes or more intense violence or language.</p>
 <p>AO: Adults Only 18+ Content suitable only for adults. May include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Not intended for persons under the age of 18.</p>	 <p>RP: Rating Pending Used in advertising games that are coming soon. This means that the game isn't finished, hasn't been officially rated yet, or both. Often game fans start discussing games long before they arrive on the mar-</p>