

Hooked on Video Games

Dear Barry,

My I really enjoyed your smart presentation about mentoring boys at home and school, but I disagree with your comments about video game use.

As a father of a 12 year-old son and as an elementary school teacher for 10 years, one of the main beliefs I hold dearly is that the use of video games,

the Internet, and even the television should be strongly discouraged, limited, if not banned outright from the house. They can be highly addictive. They also teach values that are contrary to social responsibility. There are many researchers who support my view.

In our home we don't have a television, but very occasionally we take in a local movie or video. While we also don't have any gaming stations, my son has a very old hand-me-down Gameboy, which he hasn't touched for a long time. We allow him to play the occasional game on the Internet in our room where we can easily see what he is playing. He certainly knows that he is not allowed games involving violence.

He complains occasionally, but generally he is pretty content, as he fully understands our reasons to limit his screen time. Instead, he is very active physically with martial arts, street hockey, basketball, soccer, and swimming. He bikes everywhere and practices his violin almost everyday.

It's a lot more work for us to keep him stimulated than to have him plugged into a computer, but he is an incredibly well-adjusted kid. He gets straight A's without really



trying, and we put no pressure on him to succeed whatsoever.

I think the use of video games, the Internet, and other types of electronic-based media are really detrimental to children's language development. It's the primary reason why today's kids think reading sucks! My son was reading the Iliad and the Odyssey several years ago. My wife read one of the two epic books of poetry to him first. Since he loved it, he then chose to take the second book out the library to read himself.

He is not asymmetrically developed in any way. He's just literate and loves reading.

The human species has been for around about 50,000 years or so without television, Gameboys, Xbox, Playstation or the Internet. Don't you think we can live without most of these items – at least without the highly addictive video games?

*Simon,
Vancouver*

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Dear Simon,

I know that many thoughtful parents and educators like you, Simon, are concerned about the dangers of emerging technologies, especially the potential addictiveness of video games. I often hear parents worrying aloud about how to manage the time their sons spend playing video games. When we read headlines depicting video games as mind-numbing Crack and media articles that compare gamers to strung-out heroin addicts, it's no wonder we worry about the long-range influences these electronic games may have on our boys.

For many the video game alarm sounded in 1999 when the media suggested that violent video games provoked the Columbine school shootings; some analysts even argued that part of the killers' problem might have been desensitization due to their constant exposure to violent imagery in these games.

Recently, we learned that the world's most wired nation – South Korea – has portrayed video games as violence-ridden vehicles after 10 people died from playing games in 2005, including one 28 year old man who collapsed in an Internet cafe after playing an online game for 50 hours.

You might be interested to know that a very large percentage of the general population plays video games regularly, but the amount of time playing is unrelated to ethnicity, household income level or parent's level of education. Boys greatly outnumber boys as game players; last year's July issue of Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine reported that 80% of all boys and just 20% of all girls.

What is a parent or teacher to think? Are we becoming a play station nation? Wouldn't youth be better off read-

Are we becoming a play station nation?



ing books?

Instead of seeing video games as dangerously addictive, many are suggesting now that playing these games can make our kids smarter and adaptive. They argue that video games actually stimulate the brain, that through the wonders of our brain's neuroplasticity, games can actually retune the brain to become more efficient and can even reduce symptoms of ADHD.

Studies also reveal that among the generation of kids growing up wired, knowledge gleaned through video game playing can be transferred to other activities, sparking motivation to learn a special skill such as how to create a podcast, direct a YouTube video, publish an anime site, or hack an iPhone.

Oddly enough, I have noticed that *parents and educators* who are **critical of video games** rarely report playing video games.

As we see how youth take to these new technologies, I can't help but wonder what might happen with boys' school engagement and achievement if teachers had the resources to provide similar educational nourishment to inspire such ingenuity. Parents who banish boys to their bedrooms to complete school assignments must wonder why many of these boys are willing to spend hours and months struggling and delaying gratification to get to the next level in an electronic game.

Given that just last week the sales of Grand Theft Auto IV surpassed all records for video gaming revenue, with first week sales reaching just over half a billion US dollars, it would seem that the market for video games is here to stay. Thus it only seems sensible, while considering the potential influences of these electronic games, to familiarize ourselves with their strengths as well as their potential drawbacks.

It is only sensible that we familiarize ourselves with the strengths and potential drawbacks of electronic games.

Oddly enough, I have noticed that parents and educators who are critical of video games rarely report playing video games. Not being an avid video gamer myself, for many years I tended to believe the bad press about these games, until I began to really listen to the conflicts between parents and their sons, and especially to what boys had to say about video games.



I have learned that most boys who play:

- enjoy the spatial and highly visual challenges presented by video games
- thrive on sorting through hypotheses in order to make sense of the game's environment
- take pleasure in managing a dizzying array of information and options
- appreciate the complex problems they solve to achieve success
- willingly delay gratification for weeks to get to the next level
- attach importance to finding meaning in the game's world, and making decisions that help create order and predictability
- value the tangible results games provide
- understand the line between game violence and violence in life
- welcome the social interactions that gaming provides
- collaborate with others to achieve success

What happens for boys who develop problem usage and even perhaps become addicted to video games?

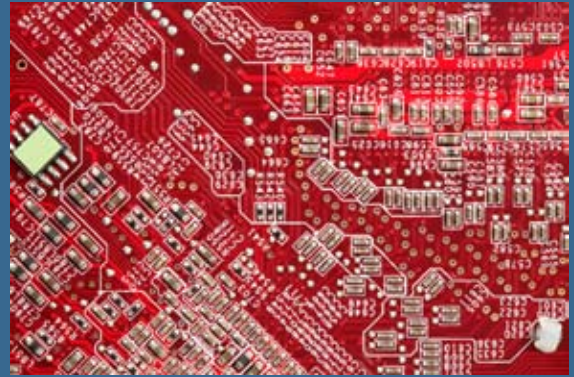
While there is currently no video game addiction category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and last year's attempt to include it in the manual was rejected for lack of sufficient evidence, there is a small percentage of boys who struggle with controlling their problematic thoughts as well as the amount of time they play. Naturally, we need to look for ways that to help them control their game playing, so that the games do not control them.

While most boys are simply relieving everyday stress through playing video games, it is still a good idea to be alert to the warning signs of addiction. If a boy becomes violent when asked to stop playing a game, it may be a strong indication that there's a problem.

There are three hallmark indicators that professionals use to diagnose an addiction:

- A compulsive and physiological craving
- The need for higher doses to obtain the same effect
- Distressing and uncomfortable symptoms during withdrawal

If a boy appears to be struggling with any of these symptoms, parents need to consider the degree to which their son's game playing behaviour could be a problem that interferes with his everyday functioning. Over-engagement with video gaming, along with prolonged withdrawal from family, friends, and life in general may mean that you need to seek help.



But parents also need to consider whether the obsessive playing of video games is a problem or a symptom.

Remember too that just as adult addictions may take many forms besides excessive use of substances—too much time spent working or shopping, for example—video games may not be the main cause of an addiction, but simply the milieu or backdrop where addictive personality tendencies get played out.

It is also worth noting that a parent's perception of a son's video game playing is very subjective. I bet that you rarely find yourself complaining about a boy obsessing with playing a newly learned musical piece or completion of a school project. We need to be cautious in how we judge our boy's gaming world, or we are prone to be reactive and even dismissive.

Many parents may feel overwhelmed by fear if they consider that their son may have deeper emotional problems than the one presented by his game playing; thus they may focus on limiting access to games when their son really needs help for deeper underlying issues – perhaps anxiety, depression or disturbing thoughts and emotions.

More often I have discovered that boys who struggle with traditional classroom book learning, listening to lectures and completing written assignments seek success through the feeling of competence and intelligence they get by playing video games. When parents over-

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react by withdrawing all game play, they may be inadvertently pushing their son toward further despair and disconnection.

Meanwhile, I agree with Simon's basic message about taking the time and attention to seek a balanced family life that encompasses varied activities and opportunities within the community. Get outside and bike together, read together, and develop broad sustainable interests.

I don't necessarily think, however, that we would be better off without video games and up-and-coming technologies. Maybe we need to sit with our boys and learn from them how to play video games, Showing interest in their electronic world will help us connect with our sons, and will also place us in a better position to discuss limits and other sensitive issues about the ideas and cultures presented within games.

In fact, with a bit of good fortune we will mostly come to learn that the new digital technologies are bringing up a new generation who are creators of media rather than just passive consumers; that within these digital environments among peers, boys who create and evaluate media will derive a sense of competence, autonomy, self-determination and connectedness.

Finally, I invite parents and teachers to consider to what degree our homes and schools are disconnected from real-world literacies so revered by boys surfing the edge of technology. What might happen if we embraced boys' interest and level of engagement with video games as well as other opportunities afforded by the Internet in our schools?

As knowledge is changing so rapidly, we need to adapt to these changes, seeking balance in our children's world, with digital technology, like sports, music, and literature, another rich area for exploration.

As for video games – I suspect that in 10 years time we will discover what my mom told me about my love of rock collecting and go-cart building decades ago when I was a boy:

Moderation is key. • • • • •

Barry MacDonald, MentoringBoys.com

