Children and Video Games: Playing with Violence

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Video gaming (playing video games) has become a popular activity for people of all ages. Many children and adolescents spend large amounts of time playing them. Video gaming is a multibillion-dollar industry bringing in more money than movies and DVDs. Video games have become very sophisticated and realistic. Some games connect to the Internet, which can allow children and adolescents to play online with unknown adults and peers.

While some games have educational content, many of the most popular games emphasize negative themes and promote:

- the killing of people or animals
- the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol
- criminal behavior, disrespect for authority and the law
- sexual exploitation and violence toward women
- racial, sexual, and gender stereotypes
- foul language, obscenities, and obscene gestures

There is growing research on the effects of videogames on children. Some video games may promote learning, problem solving and help with the development of fine motor skills and coordination. However, there are concerns about the effect of violent video games on young people who play videogames excessively.

Studies of children exposed to violence have shown that they can become: "immune" or numb to the horror of violence, imitate the violence they see, and show more aggressive behavior with greater exposure to violence. Some children accept violence as a way to handle problems.

Studies have also shown that the more realistic and repeated the exposure to violence, the greater the impact on children. In addition, children with emotional, behavioral and learning problems may be more influenced by violent images.

Children and adolescents can become overly involved and even obsessed with videogames. Spending large amounts of time playing these games can create problems and lead to:

- poor social skills
- time away from family time, school-work, and other hobbies
- lower grades and reading less
- exercising less, and becoming overweight
- aggressive thoughts and behaviors

Tips for Parents

Parents can help their children enjoy these games and avoid problems by:

- checking the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings to learn about the game's content
- selecting appropriate games—both in content and level of development
- playing videogames with their children to experience the game's content
- setting clear rules about game content and playing time, both in and outside of your home
- strongly warning children about potential serious dangers of Internet contacts and relationships while playing games online

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- talking with other parents about your family's video game rules
- remembering that you are a role model for your children including video games you play as an adult

If parents are concerned that their child is spending too much time playing video games or appears preoccupied or obsessed with aggressive or violent video games, they should first set some limits (for example playing the games for one hour after all homework is done) and try to encourage the child to participate in other activities.

If there is continued concern about their child's behavior or the effects of videogames, a consultation with a qualified mental health professional may be helpful.