

It's Not Just a Game

By Teresa Parker, Kids Ranch Mental Wellness Coordinator

Enhancing and protecting our children's brain functioning is so important!

Currently, there are lots of articles and books available that focus on various aspects of developing and protecting healthy brains. The articles typically speak about the importance of maintaining a healthy diet, incorporating exercise into your weekly routine, (3-4 times is suggested), and the effectiveness of vitamin supplements and medications.

We can all agree that caring for a healthy brain is critical for all of us— whatever our age and circumstances. However, these concerns are even more vital when we are speaking about protecting our children's vulnerable brains.

One of the major concerns that has recently come to the forefront in our society is the negative impact video games and other screen time is having on children's well-being. Children with ADD are especially at risk if allowed to have unlimited access to electronics.

Certainly, there is a positive side to electronic games and children's use of phones. Some of the games are entertaining and can even reduce stress if played for a healthy length of time. (The science suggests no more than an hour a day, and an hour of no electronics prior to sleeping.) We have all heard that gaming can help develop or strengthen eye-hand coordination. Some games teach strategic thinking and problem solving; and some of the games are clearly educational. Creativity is inspired by problem solving and developing strategies for success in the games. Clearly, there is an opportunity for a lot of positive social interaction that one can have by gaming with friends.

However, there are many negative consequences video games have on young minds when they are allowed to play for excessive lengths of time. In the remainder of the article, I will explain some of the most concerning effects.

In the 40 years of my work in the field of Psychotherapy for children, teens and families, I have seen a significant increase in serious problems related to video games and screen time.

We know from studies that prolonged exposure to aggressive video games can increase aggressive thoughts and behaviors. We have also heard many parents share their concerns about the difficulties they have when its time to get their children off their video games.

Many parents have described great resistance and even violent temper tantrums when they tell their child it's time to get off their game, do their chores, come and eat with the family, or even get ready for school or bed. Some of the parents I work with have reported that they have been pushed, kicked or physically assaulted by their child when conflicts arise around getting off the game.

One parent of a 10-year-old child recently said to me, "It feels like there is a monster in our home and we are all intimidated by her anger. She absolutely refuses to get off the game or her

phone, or when she does, she shuts down and punishes us for telling her to quit. Typically, her resentment is so great that she will not engage in any other behaviors that the family is doing.”

There are many articles recently about the addictive quality of video games. It might be useful for us to consider the definition of addiction. The AMA (American Medical Association) states, “A behavior that has become an addiction has the following characteristic: The person’s inability to control the use of a substance or behavior, despite negative consequences”. We are already seeing that some people are so engrossed in video games and screen time that it has consumed all their attention and other interests.

We are seeing many children who are demanding unlimited use of electronics! They become extremely irritable or angry when told to stop playing. Children have vulnerable brains; and there is concern in the medical community about the psychological, social and emotional damage that this is causing.

We ask ourselves, “Why does this happen?” What is it about video games and screen time that makes it so addictive, causing people to want to return to it repeatedly and for longer lengths of time?

Well, when we engage in a pleasurable activity, it stimulates the reward center of our brain to release dopamine. Dopamine is a “feel good” and powerful neurotransmitter in the brain that gives us feelings of pleasure and reward and helps sustain our interest and attention. Normally, our brain releases dopamine when we exercise, play a sport, enjoy time with friends, or eat good food. When a person experiences pleasure or hyperarousal while playing video games, the person develops a strong desire to seek out that same pleasure again and again.

This is essentially the same mechanism that the drug Cocaine creates in the brain. The drug increases the release of dopamine, and the person experiences a positive hyperarousal and intense pleasure. As the drug begins to wear off, the person seeks out the same level of pleasure it experienced just before. The person wants to return to the drug (dopamine) “high” over and over. The more dopamine that is released, the more driven they are to return to the behavior that gives them a sense of pleasure. And as with the drug “high”, the person who is excessively gaming needs more screen time to get the same level of enjoyment.

The other consequence of this ‘dopamine rush’ is that when it stops, the person typically feels very irritable and becomes agitated or angry. I have already stated that many parents have described their children behaving with defiance, irritability, and anger when they are told to get off their device or phone. There is increasing concern that excessive and prolonged use of screen time can result in detrimental or permanent changes in the brain that may require medical treatment.

If your family has already experienced this problem with one or more of your children, please check out the many articles from WebMD, Mayo Clinic and Amen Clinic as well as other reputable sites that give information about how you can structure your child’s video and phone time. As the parent, you must be courageous in your approach, and not be intimidated by a child’s resistance to your authority. Remember that the goal is not only the wellness of your child, but the well-being of your entire family.