

Middle School Guidance Officer Report

Boys and Gaming: Finding the Balance



Gaming on a computer or device is a wildly popular pastime for kids in Australia. In fact, 94 per cent of children between 6 and 15 play games and, while girls are fast gaining on them, gaming still remains more popular with boys. It seems that although (almost) everybody's doing it, a lot of parents feel unsure about how to negotiate gaming in their households. School holidays certainly bring the issue to the fore, as many families resort to the digital

babysitter, and finding a balance between Minecraft, Fortnite and the rest of life can feel like a full-time job.

Recently I've been contacted by several mums, in particular mums of boys, who say they have strict rules about time limits and content. However, they ask, "Am I being paranoid or just plain unreasonable to want to limit the time my boys spend gaming, especially violent games?"

Boys can become very angry towards their parents when they have their gaming time limited. My sons behaved in similar ways around Nintendo when they were young, and they weren't happy that I banned access until the weekend.

I also monitored to keep them away from games that used senseless violence and other morally unsavoury activities like stealing, verbal abuse or destruction of property. Later they told me they would play these games at other people's houses anyway, but at least at home they had a healthy balance.

Boys tend to display a few characteristics that can lead them to being competitive, more physical, more impulsive and more prone to hunting dopamine, which is the fun, focused, engaged neuro-transmitter, the 'feel good' brain chemical.

The reasons for this are varied, but basically our boys are socialised into behaving this way; perhaps that's because this expectation goes all the way back to a time when the male role was to protect and hunt for food. Genetics, hormones, brain development, cultural expectations, the way boys are treated compared to girls; each of these factors come into play.

A research paper put together by the Young and Well CRC shows general differences in the types of games girls and boys choose: "Girls expressed a preference for puzzle, role play, and platform games, whereas boys preferred games which involved action such as racing games, sports games, and beat and shoot 'em ups."



Boys are potentially more at risk of becoming addicted to gaming because playing triggers that 'competitive' reward system in the brain by releasing 'squirts' of dopamine as they pit themselves against adversaries — something they seem generally driven to do, and something their game preferences reflect.

Worrying signs

If you see the following signs, it may be a sign you do not have the balance right around gaming, indeed all technology, in your child's day-to-day life:

- Tantrums when the child is unable to have technology when they want it (remember it's a privilege that needs to be appreciated, not a right).
- Inability to play with other children and have fun.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- More meltdowns and tears over small things (this may mean he has an overloaded nervous system).
- Young children being exposed to games that are not age appropriate.
- Poor conversation skills.
- Poor self-regulation.
- Difficulty losing when playing with real people.
- Disconnection to the outside world.
- Development of a bad habit of neediness (always needing to have a screen nearby)
- Posture problems.

Sometimes, enforcing balance might make you feel like you're being a mean mum or dad, but you're the guiding presence in your children's lives. We monitor how many lollies and sweets our children eat, so we need to monitor how many hours they play in this exciting, entertaining world. Too much of a good thing is seldom good for us in the long run.

– Maggie Dent

Read more: <http://www.essentialkids.com.au/life/technology/boys-and-gaming-finding-the-balance-20140423-373xx>

Anna Willis
Middle School Guidance Officer