Video Games Can Waste Children's Time

Video games can be found in all shapes and sizes, from hand-held models to CD-ROM programs with sophisticated imagery and sound. Kids, even those who have a hard time paying attention in school, can spend hours in front of a computer monitor or television screen playing these games. Should parents worry?

Yes. Some video games, like television and movies, have objectionable content for children. Many games show excessive violence, some of it quite graphic. They may also be filled with racist or sexist images or language. More importantly, video games can be a waste of time.

Parents must realize that a developing child needs lots of time to explore and learn about the world. Television and video games are not very good ways to do this. Parents should consider how children use their time overall before deciding how much TV and video is too much. Ask yourself: If my child is playing a video game, what else isn't he doing? When children spend large amounts of their limited play time in front of the television, they're not engaged in other worthwhile activities like reading, playing sports, pursuing a hobby, helping around the house, playing outside, etc.

Don't children need to relax? If so, what's the harm of relaxing by playing video games? Unlike an adult, a child's leisure time is actually learning time. Parents often forget that their own childhood was full of experiences that helped them explore, understand and master the world around them. A child's leisure is important for acquiring knowledge, developing skills and practicing roles.

While adults may not need to acquire or develop new skills, the growing child should have every opportunity to expand his or her abilities. Unfortunately, activities that are only entertaining, like video games and most television programming, may impede a child's development by keeping him away from skill-building activities and learning experiences found in constructive leisure and play.

The manufacturers of video games would like parents to believe that playing video games is a worthwhile activity for children. They claim that electronic toys teach useful skills, especially computer skills, that are applicable to school and other settings.

However, research has shown that playing games of any kind rarely leads to skill transfer. This holds true even for games created to teach specific cognitive skills like math. What usually happens is that kids get better at using the skills to play the game, but they don't improve at using the skills in a different context. Skill transfer only occurs when the game mirrors the real world. For example, air traffic controllers report that they benefit from playing games that simulate real traffic control panels.

Even on the simple level of developing eye-hand coordination, skills at video games don't make much of a difference. Except for some handicapped children who seem to improve their eye-hand coordination by playing video games, most children develop this skill in day-to-day tasks and play activities.
The claim that electronic games teach computer skills is simply untrue. For starters, the only thing computer-like about many of the games is that the operating mechanism includes computer chips. The most popular home video entertainment system hooks up to a television. The computer chip is located in a small operating box and the controls are a hand-held device with several buttons on it. This set-up hardly looks like a computer. There isn't even a keyboard, so a child need not become familiar with it, let alone learn how to type - a skill that's necessary to use real computers.

The games that are designed to be used on personal computers are a bit closer to the mark, but not by much. All these games are very user-friendly. The most a child has to learn is how to turn on the computer, insert a disk and call up the chosen game. It takes about five minutes to learn these low-level "computer skills."

What's more, unless your child is playing a video game designed specifically to teach the player how computers operate, nothing in the process of mastering a game teaches him about the functions and uses of computers. He is learning how to play the game well, nothing more. Learning the tricks and traps of the game and how to move to a higher level is what holds the child's fascination and keeps him actively involved for hours at a stretch.

But don't be fooled into thinking that all those hours he spends playing video games will turn him into a computer wizard. Playing video games doesn't require or foster any computer skill whatsoever. In fact, if real computer skills were required, the games would probably be less popular.

So what are parents to do when their kid insists on buying and playing the hottest new video game? It's a question of balance. Take a conservative stance, until proven otherwise. Assume that playing video games is generally a waste of time, but it's okay for kids to waste an hour on them here or there. Unless the content of the game is objectionable (i.e., violent, racist or sexist), parents may limit video games to a few hours a week.

Parents have a responsibility to assess the value of children's activities and the amount of time they spend on any one activity. Children may have energy, enthusiasm and confidence, but may lack good judgment because of limited experience. So, you be the judge. When children cry and plead for more time to play video games, remind them that there are lots of other things they can do with their lives.

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