Addicted to Video Games
Parenting Today's Teens
Mark Gregston
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More than 2.5 billion video games have been sold worldwide and the industry is growing exponentially.   In fact, video game sales now surpass sales of both music and movies. For millions of kids and young adults, playing video games has become an obsession.

To give you some history, I grew up in New Orleans – not exactly the most conservative city. But when I was a kid, people weren't allowed to play pinball games at the arcade until they were 21. That seems like a silly law today, especially since nowadays nearly every family has their own version of a pinball arcade right in their own home. I find nothing wrong with most of these games. In fact, playing them together with your teen is a great way to connect. But some kids and young adults are being consumed by them, and that's where the problem lies.

I think what happens in many homes is that the parents buy video game consoles, intending to play games together as a family. The kids initially enjoy them, and the parents play along from time to time. But the excitement eventually wanes and the kids come home from their friends' houses asking for the more advanced video games their friends have. Partly out of guilt for not playing with them more often, mom and dad agree to buy the more advanced video games that the kids can play on their own, not paying much attention to what's on them or how much time is spent playing them. After all, it keeps them at home, out of trouble.

THE DRAW OF VIDEO GAMES

Teenagers love playing video games because they provide a challenge and an escape. They offer mental and visual stimuli that can cause the "gamer" to forget where they are. In fact, hours can pass as if minutes.   It's sad that we live in a culture that is so stressed that kids feel the need to escape in this way. It shows the intensity of that world out there and the need for parents to make their home and their relationship a place of rest for their teen.

What's more, kids find a sense of value and esteem in playing these games. Even the dorkiest kids can become virtual sports stars, rock stars, cool secret agents or Rambo-like warriors in these games. It's one thing they can do better than their parents and maybe even their friends, so they relish it.   And it's one place — maybe the only place — where they feel totally in control.

WHEN IT BECOMES ALL-CONSUMING

I find it interesting that the word "Atari," the brand name of one of the original video game platforms, means in Japanese "you're about to become engulfed." And that's exactly what happens to kids and an increasing number of young adults who play video games. They become engulfed in these games and lose all sense of time or care for anything else. Many kids stay up all night secretly playing video games, night after night. The loss of sleep causes them to become emotional wrecks and their grades begin to slip. Like any other addiction, they can't get enough of it.

There is also an opportunity cost to playing video games. Every hour spent on them is an hour the teen isn't doing something more productive, like learning a new hobby, getting exercise, doing homework, or spending time with the family. Anything that takes over a child's time and attention for many hours every day should be moderated. Parents need to moderate the amount of time that their kids play and the type of games their kids play, and not just follow the rating on the package.   Make sure the game is appropriate for your child and your family values.

Some argue that playing video games is a good way to spend time with friends, and I agree.   But kids who are consumed by these games will tell you that they started playing games with their friends,

but then moved on to playing against people online that they don't even know. So that's a red flag — don't let your kids become so consumed by these games that they no longer invite their friends over to play.

THE EFFECT OF VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES

While most moms don't want their kids playing "shooter" games, research is split on the effect of violent video games. I find just as many experts saying they have a negative effect as not. I truly think that it is more of a reflection on the individual child, their maturity, and the situation in the home than anything else. If you have a kid who is already prone to violent outbursts, hangs around with violent kids, or seems to lack a moral compass, violent games should be avoided. . . . .

Some experts offer the horrific shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 as an example of the negative impact of violent video games. The two teenage shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were known to be immersed in violent video games. They reported in their online diaries that their lives were most gratifying while playing in a virtual world. Some think that the two killers may have been desensitized to killing due to their constant exposure to violent imagery and actions in such video games, as well as the violent movies they both enjoyed, which gloried killing.

Trouble began to brew after Klebold and Harris were grounded from video games when they were arrested for breaking into a vehicle. That's when they had time on their hands to begin planning the school massacre.   Some experts believe that the anger and tactics that were previously being projected into the video games was unleashed into the real world when they could no longer play. Maybe so, but psychiatrists diagnosed Harris, the leader of the two, a psychopath who was already bent on killing those in the school who had wronged him.   A psychopath has no ability to tell what is real from what is not real, and is characterized by selfishness, ruthlessness and the inability to feel guilt.

So it becomes a "chicken or the egg" question. Did the games cause Harris to become a psychopath, or was he already a psychopath and the games fueled his murderous intentions? Obviously, the latter is true. If violent video games did create psychopaths, we'd see Columbine-like massacres happening around the world every minute of the day, because millions of kids and young adults are playing them. Of course, that's not happening.

I believe that for most kids violent video games won't do anything at all – especially if the game is played only periodically as a pastime. The normal child won't become desensitized to killing people by simply playing "shooter" video games. They know that the opposing characters in the game aren't real — no different than the skeet I shoot or the plastic ducks lined up at the shooting range at the fair. For boys, who are visually oriented and naturally have a warrior instinct, these games of skill and conquering are very appealing. It's when they're played incessantly that the fantasy world can sometimes get mixed up with the real world. And that's a problem only if the child is already emotionally unstable.

GETTING IT UNDER CONTROL

What you as a parent can do is to keep an eye on the games your teen is playing. When a new game is purchased or is given to your teen as a gift, play the game with them to learn how it works and what images and values it portrays. If you find it objectionable, then get rid of it, even if your child pitches a fit. Most cities have video game exchanges, so take your teen there so they can find a better game to trade for.   Don't throw the baby out with the bath water by banning video games altogether. There are literally thousands of good games, including skills-based sports games, skateboarding games, motocross and racing games, city-building games, and multi-tiered adventures with no immoral or violent overtones.

If your teen is spending way too much time playing video games, or if the games are affecting their motivation or personality, then it's time to act. Cut back the number of hours they play daily. Shut down the unit and take away the power cord after a certain hour in the evening. Require that they match the time they play video games with equal amounts of other more productive non-digital activities. And

remember this—kids play video games on their computers and on smart phones as well, not just using the game box hooked to the TV, so be sure to keep an eye on that as well.

Playing video games can be a fun activity that you and your teenager can enjoy together. In fact, it can help your relationship if you make it a point to play with them on a regular basis. But it can be an unhealthy activity if it consumes your child's time and attention, takes them away from you, their friends or the rest of the family, or if it promotes immoral thoughts or behavior. Some video games can feed violent or antisocial behavior in teens who are already prone to such problems.

If your teen is already caught up in video games to an extent that it is consuming their life, and you can't get them away from it, then treat it like any other addiction. Intervene with the help of a good counselor who deals with such addictions. They'll give you the tools you both need and uncover the root causes for why the teen tends to be consumed by this kind of activity.

The bottom line for parents is this—tell your kids that you'll stand beside them through thick and thin, but you'll stand in front of them when it comes to blocking anything unhealthy, immoral or antisocial that is influencing their life. And that includes controlling their use of video games.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, radio host, and the founder and director of Heartlight, located in Hallsville, Texas. For more information and helpful resources for moms and dads, check out our website. It's filled with ideas and tools to help you become a more effective parent. Go to www.heartlightministries.org. Or read other helpful articles by Mark, at www.markgregston.com. You can also call Heartlight directly at (903) 668-2173. Hear the Parenting Today's Teens broadcast on a radio station near you, or download the podcast at www.parentingtodaysteens.org.