Video Game Addiction: How Do You Know If Your Child Is Addicted?

When does your kid's video game time cross the line from fun to a video game addiction?

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It's a beautiful day, but you just can't pry the game controller from your child's hands. Apparently, he wants to play the game more than he wants to play outside -- or do anything else. Should you be worried?

Video games can help children develop useful reasoning and memory skills, because they're interactive activities, according to the American Journal of Play. But these games also come with built-in incentives, such as awarding points and leveling up, to keep users playing -- which leads some children to develop a gaming addiction.

What Is a Video Game Addiction?

A video game addiction occurs when video games take precedence over any other activity. A review published in the Journal of Behavioral Addictions assessed gaming addiction by determining whether a person exhibited a preoccupation with gaming, couldn't resist playing games, used them excessively, neglected work (or homework), exhibited a lack of control, neglected her social life or couldn't cut down despite knowing that her game use was causing problems. Dr. Lisa Strohman, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Technology Wellness Center to help parents who have concerns about how technology affects their families, says, "At the Technology Wellness Center, we've broken video game overuse into four areas: behavioral, physical, emotional and interpersonal. Not all kids have problems in all four areas." She adds, "Love your children as strongly as you possibly can, but don't love them too much that you assume they're always doing the right thing." Keep an eye on their gaming and how it might be affecting them.

Should You Be Concerned?

Just because your child plays video games sometimes doesn't mean you need to worry. Research published in the Journal of Pediatrics found that children under 11 played video games for an average of half an hour each day. If your child engages in activities besides video games, has healthy sleeping and eating habits, and has positive interactions with you and the family, he's probably keeping the gaming in check, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

How Much Is Too Much?

When children play more than five hours a day, they could be addicted, according to Kansas State University. One problem video games can have for developing brains is that they can cause the user to not interact with others in real life. "Video games are not good for your brain," says Dr. Fran Walfish, clinical psychotherapist and author of "The Self-

Aware Parent." "On the contrary, they train the brain to 'tune out' other stimuli and variables by forcing the video game activity into the foreground and push everything else, including people and relationships, into the background." This "tuning out," while probably OK in small doses, is not ideal for kids.

What Are Signs Your Child Might Be Addicted?
Dr. Strohman gave some examples of video game overuse signs in each area:

- **Behavioral Changes**
  These include increased intensity with the games, inability to stop playing, hostility or frustration when not playing, and loss of interest in other hobbies.

- **Physical Symptoms**
  These can include not sleeping well, not taking baths or caring about hygiene, and experiencing chronic back or hand and wrist pain.

- **Emotional Symptoms**
  A common one is depression, which often manifests as sulking for girls and anxiety for boys. The kids are happy when they're gaming, but irritable when they're not.

- **Interpersonal Signs**
  These may include poor communication skills, not making eye contact, making more online friendships than real life ones and withdrawing from the family.

How Can You Best Regulate Your Kid's Gaming?
"Parents should keep the computer out of the bedroom," says Dr. Strohman. She adds, "Parents should look at the ratings of the video games." Games are rated for difficulty and violence. Common Sense Media also provides detailed information on a video game's content, so parents can determine if it's appropriate for their child.

Modeling suitable behavior is also important. Dr. Strohman has "Tech-Free Tuesdays" at her house, where the whole family tosses their devices in a basket. This demonstrates how people balance their lives by making time to connect with others. The research from Kansas State University suggests limiting your child's video gaming to less than three hours a day. If your child is bored, help her find other fun things to do.

If you're still concerned about your child's possible gaming overuse, check in with his pediatrician.

Need ideas? Check out 101 Things to Do When Kids Say "I'm Bored" for some inspiration.

Laura Agadoni is a parenting writer and mom whose articles appear in various publications such as Modern Mom, The Penny Hoarder, Tom's of Maine, Global Post and Livestrong.