

Excessive gaming an 'addiction'?



Nikki Symons, of Wellington, asked:

My young teen loves his Xbox game *Halo*. I do restrict how much time he spends on it, but I believe that if I didn't monitor this he would probably quite happily play on it for hours at a time. He does have other interests, but this one is at the top of his list. Is there an addiction here that I need to be concerned about? What drives young male teens to have such an obsession with these sorts of games? He is often tired and grumpy after playing, so what is it giving him?

Mark Griffiths, of the International Gaming Research Unit of the Psychology Department, Nottingham Trent University, responded:

I receive emails like this almost every week from concerned parents, but the good news is that very few teenagers are genuinely addicted to playing video games.

I've spent 30 years researching video-game addiction and, while I believe that it can be a genuine addiction, and have the same consequences as other more

traditional addictions (such as major negative impacts on education and/or occupation, compromising of close relationships, total preoccupation with the behaviour, withdrawal symptoms if unable to play, using the behaviour as a way to modify mood, loss of control), the number of individuals who would meet all the criteria for addiction is very small.

In my opinion, the vast majority of parents who are concerned about their son's playing of video games (and it is almost always boys; girls are far more likely to be engaged in excessive social-media use) tend to pathologise their child's play because they believe they should be doing something more productive with their time. This is not addiction.

Video games are fun and exciting to play, and there are lots of in-game rewards that mean that children can easily spend many hours a day playing.

I have three "screenagers" myself, who all play video games. As a responsible parent I ask myself four things: Is my children's video-game-playing affecting their (i) education and homework, (ii) physical education, (iii) chores around the house, and (iv) peer friendships?

Most parents will answer these questions and say these activities are not being affected. Playing video games many hours a day is not in itself bad. The

content and context of video-game-playing is far more important than the number of hours. When I was a child I used to watch three or four hours of television a day with my parents. My children don't watch much television, but do spend a lot of time in front of a screen. This is normal and is how teenagers live their lives today.

However, excessive playing can be problematic without being addictive. It can take time away from things like doing homework and playing sports, and can impact on sleep. Individuals can become sleepy after engaging in any activity that is done for hours on end. These are all things that parents should be aware of and allocate screen time accordingly, because this can have longer-term knock-on effects. In my experience, children are often grumpy after playing video games because they have been told by their parents to stop doing something they enjoy doing.

In these cases, children need to be given time warnings ("you can play for another 30 minutes and then that's it until tomorrow") to prepare them for the fact they will be stopping playing in the near future.

Send questions to:

Ask-A-Scientist,
PO Box 31-035, Christchurch
8444
Or email questions@ask-a-scientist.net