

JONLA
Journal of the National Library of Addictions
Publisher and Editor-in-Chief: Punyamurtula Kishore, MD

Volume 5, Issue 3
Alan Fisch, MD

March 2008
National Library of Addictions

ARE VIDEO GAMES ADDICTIVE?

In the 1970's, there was a hue and cry from child protective activists against the effects of TV violence on youth. Most of the research showed the concern was groundless; in fact, some of the TV watching appeared to help vulnerable young people sublimate and manage aggressive impulses better.

A recent article in *Current Psychiatry*, vol. 6, no. 12, examines video games and their potential for addictiveness, violence and other dysfunctional outcomes.¹ That's our focus in this month's JNLA.

The American Medical Association reports that 70-90% of American youths play video games, varying from adventure, fantasy and mild violence, to intense violence, graphic sexual content and strong language with interactive formats that develop into on-line communities.

Most kids, boys and girls, find the games fun and relaxing. There are findings, however, where some youngsters experience some problems, particularly:

- Spending excessive amounts of time (to be explained later)
- Develop inappropriate behaviors modeled after their games
- Get caught up in inappropriate relationships on-line, through their games.

Top 10 reasons why youngsters play video games:

Boys

1. It's fun
2. It's exciting
3. Something to do when bored
4. Challenge of figuring things out
5. To compete and win
6. Helps me relax
7. Nothing else to do
8. I like guns and weapons
9. Create my own world
10. Learn new things

¹ Olson CK, et al. Factors correlated with violent video game use by adolescent boys and girls. "J Adolesc Health" 2007; 41 (1): 77-83.

Girls

1. It's fun
2. Something to do when bored
3. It's exciting
4. Challenge of figuring things out
5. Nothing else to do
6. To compete and win
7. Create my own world
8. Learn new things
9. Helps me relax
10. To forget problems

In June 2007, the AMA convened a panel to examine the emotional and behavioral effects of excessive video game play. In the end, the panel reported only that they had insufficient evidence to conclude that video game activity is an addiction. The APA (American Psychiatric Association) chimed in by reiterating that DSM-IV-TR, the latest listing of mental disorders, does not include an entry for video game addiction. However, the DSM-V task force will be considering this as a possible mental disorder listing in the 2012 edition.

Normative Research

The Kaiser Family Foundation did a national study of children from age 8 to 18. They found that the average middle school youngster played video games 10 minutes to one hour per day. Playing more than one hour per day was found in the outliers and considered excessive.

Video game play was found to be one of the most popular leisure-time activities for this middle-school group.

- 1/3 of boys and 2/3 of girls played video games less than 2 hours per week
- 1/3 of boys and 11% of girls played video games 6 or 7 days per week
- Boys played more than girls and 45% of boys played more than 6 hours per week
- 12.6% of boys played more than 15 hours per week
- ½ listed at least 1 game of their top 5 games, rated M for Mature

When does video game (V-G) playing become pathologic? The overwhelming, consuming need to play video games, associated with distress and functional impairment, is pathologic. In this area of activity, the combination of high engagement plus core addictive characteristics help to define a pathological involvement.

What are some of the core addictive characteristics?²

- Feeling agitated when not playing
- Unable to decrease time spent playing
- Give up sleep time to play
- Miss meals because of V-G play
- Tardiness because of V-G play
- Arguments at home because of V-G play

² Stern SE. Addiction to technologies: a social psychological perspective of Internet addiction. "Cyberpsychol Behav" 1999; 2(5): 419-24.

- V-G play interfering with schoolwork
- V-G play interfering with social relationships
- Excessive amounts of money spent on V-G's
- Also, excessive V-G play has been linked to: sensation-seeking, boredom, animosity, poor academics, high family conflict, poor peer relationships and trauma

What are the games and devices?

1. Role-playing games: players assume identities and manage role-specific tasks as well as resources in order to progress through the game (ex. Enix: "Final Fantasy").
2. Strategy games: turn-based and real-time oriented. The goals involve managing resources to achieve higher goals such as building an empire (ex. Take 2: "Civilization", Atari: "Roller Coaster Tycoon").
3. Social experience involving family or friends in the same room or on-line. Game consoles facilitate same-room experience: Xbox 360, Playstation 3, Nintendo Wii but may be played on-line as well.
4. Computer-based games have a tendency to be more solitary but connect to a virtual community of thousands of individuals playing online, around the world. (ex. Blizzard Entertainment: "World of Warcraft", Midway Amusement Games: "Lord of the Rings Online").

Violence and Sexual Content

The research evidence is not conclusive, but there is a strong suggestion of linkage between the youngster's perception of aggression and violence and violent content of video games. Middle-schoolers who play one or more M-rated games are more likely to:

- Get poor grades in school
- Vandalize property for fun
- Engage in fist fights
- Be bullies

What to do if you suspect V-G play is excessive:³

- Monitor and assess overall functioning
- Assess engagement in peer relationships and regular activities
- Take into account any history of trauma and the state of the home/family stability

Steps to take to keep V-G play healthy:

- Keep computer and game console in a community area in the home rather than in their bedroom.
- Check age-based ratings and content before renting or buying.
- Communicate with friends' parents about the V-G's they play together in their homes.
- Talk with your children about Internet relationships and V-G content that you are uncomfortable with.

³ Charlton JP, et al. Distinguishing addiction and high engagement in the context of online game playing. "Comput Human Behav" 2007; 23: 1531-48.

- Play the V-G's with your children and have them show you what they like about the V-G.
- Engage in casual conversation from time to time to keep track of any disturbing changes or shifts in the V-G experience.
- Consult with a mental health professional if you become concerned about changes in your child's mood, school performance, social relationships, eating or sleeping habits.

Most kids do not develop problems as a result of playing video games. V-G play can be considered excessive when the activity exceeds normative (usual or average) play; and pathologic when it produces distress or functional impairment or exacerbates a comorbid disorder.