

Gaming Console Setup and Considerations for Individuals with ASD

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Congratulations! You've decided to make the plunge and purchase a gaming system for your (inner) child. Currently there are three popular gaming consoles: Sony PS3, Nintendo Wii (rumored to be succeeded by the Nintendo U around the 2012 holidays) and the Microsoft X-box. While each unit has its pros and cons, each unit seems to leapfrog the other year after year.

Nintendo started the "movement" contest by releasing the Wii with Wii remotes (also called Wiimotes). These wiimotes allow players to participate in most games by moving more than their thumbs. Thanks to some sophisticated sensors in the Wiimotes the console can detect 3 dimensional movements of the joystick and thus the player. For the first time in the home video game market, a player's swing of a racket truly mimics a player moving his arm rather than simply pressing a button.

Microsoft later released the X-box Kinect for its console. The Kinect has dual cameras that watch the player in 3-d creating an image of him while tracking the position of his head, hands, feet and torso. This tracking device allows the player to control his avatar (on screen game character) with actual body movements.

Sony's response to the movement party was the release of an "eye". A single camera device that watches glowing orbs attached to the ends of the joysticks to judge the players movements.

Your decision on which console to purchase may include such considerations as:

- Screen resolution (both the PS3 and X-box can display an HD picture in 1080p, the Wii cannot),
 - Availability of a blue-ray player (Sony has this capability, while neither the X-box nor the Wii does, although some ingenious users have found ways to modify their consoles to enable this feature while simultaneously voiding their warranties),
 - The ability to connect to your home network and stream photos and movies,
 - The ability to play on-line,
 - Or, simply price (Nintendo Wii is the least expensive).
- Regardless of which console you choose, the following are a few basic tips to help you set up a gaming friendly space:

Location:

- Basement is best: some active games encourage you to jump, lunge and run.
- Space: You want at least a 10' to 15' (preferably more) arc of space in front of your TV so that you're not bumping into furniture or other players.
- Distance: Don't put it in the same room as the fine china.

TV size:

- 46" widescreen at a minimum. This allows you to truly see everything in the game. The consoles are able to take advantage of the widescreen and fill it entirely, sometimes with minute details.
- If your budget allows, consider 55" or larger as this will enhance the overall visual gaming experience. TV's are fairly inexpensive now.

If you're not too choosy, a 60" HD 1080p TV can be had for under \$1000. (Retailers will use any excuse to put units on special: Christmas, Super Bowl, Father's Day and yes, even Mother's Day). Besides, we are all visual learners. Don't you want your child to have every advantage possible as he frags the baddies?

- Some games may seem very bright especially on new televisions. You may need to dim the overall brightness to a level the intended players can tolerate. Most new televisions have a gaming mode that is in fact brighter. Do not hesitate to change the settings. In most cases, you can create custom settings. You can then rename these settings according to a player's name.
- Some games have bright, flashing lights and quick moving imagery. While this may seem exciting and draw and maintain the player's attention, it is important to monitor each individual's response to this visual input. In some rare circumstances, flashing lights have induced epileptic seizures.

Sound:

- While not absolutely necessary, a decent sound system adds to realism of the games. Hearing the horse neigh or the crowd cheer can add to that positive feedback.
- A good-subwoofer creating that deep bass adds to the rumble of a car's engine or a jet's thrust. (It can always be turned down or muted if sound is an issue).
- If a player is sensitive to sound, simply turn down the volume or have everyone wear hearing protection.

Games:

- Rent a game: If possible, rent the game that interests your child before purchasing it (or try to borrow it from a friend). This will allow you to be sure that it meets your expectations. There is nothing worse than finding a game boring after spending \$75 on it.
- M for mature. Be aware that not every game will be appropriate for your child. The games with the "mature content" sticker are not for the faint of heart. As with movies that are "R" rated, they may

have colorful language or depict scenes that are inappropriate for your child.

- Try to match gaming interests for the new user. It may take a few attempts before finding one that "clicks". Many games are based on sports, others on movies such as: Batman, Star Wars, Harry Potter to name but a few. Sports games are popular as well as precision is not necessarily required to succeed.
- Be sure to check for warning labels on the reverse side with respect to flashing lights. If unsure, ask the clerk if there is a demo available in store to try. Most in-store demo consoles have a variety of games that can be sampled. As an alternative, you may be able to download a portion of the game directly to your home console. These demos will however be limited in terms of game play.

Some additional benefits:

Gaming allows teaching of some essential social skills, while having fun:

- **Sharing (Turn taking):** Turn-based games provide opportunities for each player to practice waiting for their turn, depending on the game.
- **Cooperation:** Some games encourage players to cooperate by requiring the players to work together in order for the game to continue to the next level or play area. For example, they may need to activate certain doors or levers simultaneously.
- **Modeling:** You can take the opportunity to model certain movements. As mentioned above, most people on the autism spectrum are visual learners. Take the opportunity to demonstrate a good stance or a good swing. You can be the "how-to" person and create a positive relationship. Some games, such as "Wii Fit" instruct participants on how to maintain a certain body position by modeling it for them on screen. Some games offer more advice than others.
- **Sportsmanship:** This is a great opportunity to model positive social behaviour. Encourage others with expressions such as: "good shot", "nice hit", "that was

cool”, “try it again”. After a period of time, the other players may start to use these same expressions.

Accessories:

- **Skins:** also called wraps, are available for the consoles themselves or the controllers. These are similar to cell phone cases and can protect your investment by giving them a rubber casing. (Important as they will often be dropped).
- **Sports packs:** you can snap a Wiimote into a plastic tennis racket or a golf club thus adding to the game’s illusion. (Warning: be sure to attach the safety strap to the player’s wrist as a flying Wiimote can quickly and easily damage a TV).
- **Wii Fit balance board** (exclusive to the Nintendo Wii) allows the user to participate in yoga classes or ski competitions by shifting his or her body weight on the balance board.

Last but not least, remember to have fun!

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