



Unhealthy Video Gaming: What Parents Can Do to Prevent It

By: Claire McCarthy, MD, FAAP

As we watch our children and teens use screens more often to play video games during the COVID-19 pandemic ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Teens-and-COVID-19.aspx](#)), many parents wonder: How much is too much?

People are spending a lot more time staring at digital screens ([/English/health-issues/conditions/eyes/Pages/What-Too-Much-Screen-Time-Does-to-Your-Childs-Eyes.aspx](#)). But after your kids log off from school and homework ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-COVID-19.aspx](#)) for the day, is it okay if they spend a few hours gaming with their friends? When video game lives replace real-life time with family and friends, is it a sign of addiction?



Let's explore why video games are so appealing to kids and what parents can do to keep gaming in check.

Gaming problems: who's at risk?

Playing video games is a fun and normal part of teenage life. But there's a small number of kids who have a hard time controlling the time they spend gaming.

Researchers are studying this and learning more (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dev0000939>) about who is at risk and why. During a 6-year study, they noticed that about 10% of adolescents had symptoms of unhealthy gaming that got worse over time. These kids seem to have a few things in common.

- They are more likely to be boys.
- They play video games at the expense of homework, sleep, exercise or relationships with family and friends.
- They may have depression ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx](#)), anxiety, shyness, aggression, and problems with too much cell phone use. Children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD (<https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/managing-feelings/overexcitement/how-to-help-your-middle-or-high-schooler-mange-overexcitement>)) may be particularly vulnerable.

This is because video gaming, like gambling ([/English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Teen-Gambling.aspx](#)), may activate the reward system in the brain, research suggests. Companies often hire psychologists to help design games that make players want to keep playing.

What is unhealthy gaming?

There is not an official diagnosis for gaming disorder (<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/internet-gaming>) in the U.S., but there may be one soon. Symptoms of internet gaming problems are listed in a reference book used by mental health doctors. Here are things you might notice if your child has unhealthy gaming habits.

- Obsessed with gaming, and is sad, irritable, or anxious when gaming is taken away.

Wants more and more gaming and is not able to cut down or quit.

No longer is interested in other activities they used to enjoy.

- Lies (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/When-Children-Lie.aspx>) about how much time they spend gaming. [Back to Top](#)
- Uses gaming to relieve bad mood.

It's a problem in other parts of the world, too. The World Health Organization recognizes "gaming disorder" (<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/gaming-disorder>) as an official condition. And in countries like South Korea and China, there are treatment programs to help people hooked on gaming.

ADHD therapy: A prescription *for* gaming?

Researchers have figured out a way to turn gaming into therapy. The Food and Drug Administration (<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-permits-marketing-first-game-based-digital-therapeutic-improve-attention-function-children-adhd>) (FDA) gave the okay for the first non-drug product to help kids ages 8 to 12 years old with inattentive or combined-type attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The digital device was not looked at in children who have ADHD and another issue (<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/add-adhd/adhd-comorbidity>), like dyslexia or anxiety disorder. It is a prescription therapy and does not replace other ADHD therapy, medication, or educational programs directed by your doctor.

The game-based digital device helped improve attention, according to 5 studies of more than 600 children. Even though it is a prescription, it is not covered by insurance now. A three-month prescription is \$450. Help may be available through the company for families that cannot afford it.

How can families avoid unhealthy gaming?

There are a few things that parents can do to prevent unhealthy video game habits from happening. Staying on top of how much your children use all forms of media (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx>) can help. Here's how.

- **Have a family media plan.** Use our media plan tool (</English/media/Pages/default.aspx>) to help you map out your child's media diet. Think carefully about what activities the video games might be displacing. Be sure that media, including gaming, isn't crowding out other important activities like homework, exercise or sleep.
- **Be mindful** about how your child uses electronic devices and video games and what games and apps your child is downloading. Make sure they understand that internet games usually have hidden messages (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Dangerous-Internet-Challenges.aspx>) and ads. They also might collect your child's personal information (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/5-Unhealthy-Ways-Digital-Ads-May-Be-Targeting-Your-Child.aspx>).
- **Keep gaming in common areas.** This isn't always possible, of course. Teens go off to their rooms with their phones and do schoolwork on their laptops. It's nearly impossible to keep track of everything they do. But to the extent that it is possible, try to keep the activity where everyone can see.
- **Play games along with them and set a good example.** Not only does this help you see what they are doing and how they are doing it, but it can help put some time limits on gaming.
- **Focus on real-world games for younger children.** Young children learn a lot when they connect with other people. (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>) Encourage them to play (</English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Caution-Children-at-Play.aspx>) with toys, books and crayons.

Set a good example and seek help if you need it. Parents who are hooked on gaming may be more prone to depression. Distracted parents often miss clues that their child needs attention and respond more harshly. If you are struggling to limit how much time you spend playing video games, know that it's okay to get help (<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>). The time you spend gaming competes with important moments with your child. It also makes it harder to convince your child not to do the same (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352853218301202>).

Remember

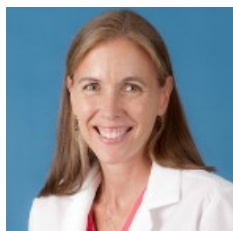
Most children and teens who play video games do not become addicted or have other problems (</English/health-conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/default.aspx>). But when gaming starts to get in the way of other parts of time to step in. If your child or teen resists your efforts to cut back on gaming, call your pediatrician (</tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/Is-it-OK-to-call-the-pediatrician-during-COVID-19-even-if-Im-not->

sure-my-child-is-sick.aspx) for advice. Your pediatrician can recognize when a teen is struggling and can get the support (/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx) your child needs. [Back to Top](#)

More Information

- How to Make a Family Media Use Plan (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx#%3a~%3atext=Media%20Use%20Plan%20Tips%20for%20Families%3a%20Screens%20should%2csleep%2c%20school%20problems%2c%20aggression%20and%20other%20behavior%20issues.)
- Video Games: Establish Your Own Family's Rating System (/English/family-life/Media/pages/video-games-set-your-own-ratings-system.aspx)
- Mental Health During COVID-19: Signs Your Child or Teen May Need More Support (/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx)
- How Virtual Violence Impacts Children's Behavior: Steps for Parents (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx)
- Online Gamers Anonymous (<http://www.olganon.org/home>) is a self-help group that follows the same 12 steps of recovery by Alcoholics Anonymous. A support group for family and friends who are concerned about a loved one's gaming, similar to how Al Anon helps individuals concerned about someone else's drinking, is also available.
- Common Sense Media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>), a website that provides reviews on media as well as advice for parents on healthy media use.

About Dr. McCarthy:



Claire McCarthy, MD, FAAP, has written about health and parenting for multiple publications and websites for the past 30 years. She is a primary care pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital, an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, a senior editor for Harvard Health Publications, and an official spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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