Video Games – To Play or Not to play?

When I ran my eyes down my children's holiday wish list this past season, I came across a handful of video games. Worried and embarrassed, I heard my mother's voice in my head, "Kids these days spend too much time on video games and not enough time playing in the street and socializing." What kind of message would I be giving to my children if I bought them video games for the holidays? Would I be encouraging extra screen time and social isolation? Would I be reinforcing aggressive tendencies? My thoughts quickly raced to some recent meetings at school where teachers were concerned that children were engaged in too much screen time, some even thinking there should be no screen time at all if it's not related to academics.

Well despite some of my reservations, I admit it. I caved. I bought my kids the latest sports video games and some X-box live credit. Since we didn't go away over the holiday break, and my kids and I had some free time, I actually watched (and even played) some video games with them. I took some mental notes of their game time, what they were doing, and what they were missing. While playing his game, I observed one of my boys reading (which I generally fight him to do) various bits of information on the screen. He was thoroughly engaged and followed multi-step written directions. When he played Minecraft, one of the most popular games these days, I watched in awe as he built objects. He used visual spatial reasoning to manipulate abstract and real objects. Some of the skills he was demonstrating actually looked visually similar to some of the subtests found on an IQ test that I give! He managed resources, recognized patterns, and estimated the size of objects before making decisions to use them. I watched him multi-task when for example, an unexpected enemy appeared on his screen while he was engaged in another activity. All this while beautiful, classical music played in the background. I couldn't help but feel relaxed just from the music alone. It reminded me of when he was an infant and I played DVD's with classical music, following "expert advice" that it may "boost brain development".

While being totally defeated by my other son in the newest basketball game, I watched his commendable hand eye coordination skills. I watched him take risks. I watched him experience defeat (that is, when I was not the one he was playing against!). I watched him make fast, accurate decisions. He persevered despite his obvious frustration. Different than the passive

engagement of T.V., these video games had him physically active. He had to perform the act of his avatar on the screen. My daughter was following dance moves on her screen. These types of video games were not available to me when I was child. How awesome, I thought, a free dance class and built in physical activity when they could not go out and play!

When I asked all of them questions about decisions they had made in their games, they told me about their previous experiences with the games, evidencing good problem solving and memory skills. They developed goals for their game, goals for the day, and goals for next time. My children had an opportunity to feel superior to me, explaining things to me that I did not know. What a confidence builder it was for them to tell me how poor they performed the first time they played and what they were able to do at this point.

As for the social experience, these games did not replace their off -line social life. In some ways they just expanded it. Through on-line interactive games, they were able to socialize with peers when play dates could not be made! I watched them work cooperatively with friends to build communities. They listened to others and formulated plans with them. They used their individual skills to contribute to a greater picture. They laughed together, empathized with each other, and helped each other.

So my new outlook on video games is that they're not that bad after all. They may actually be good for some things! As everything else in life, moderation is the key. In no way would I recommend that a child spend endless hours at a time playing video games or sacrificing face to face social interaction or school studies. But with some general guidelines, there may be positive outcomes from some video game time. After all, every good educator knows that one of the keys to successful learning is active engagement. That's why we recommend apps for kids to practice academic skills. If learning can be disguised as a game, the more successful learning can be. Even though these games were not devised with learning in mind, we can certainly take advantage of what they may offer.

Here are some general guidelines that I would recommend. To me, not all games are created equal. I would favor games that require the player to come up with strategies and decisions as opposed to games that require hurting, stealing, or killing. I still discourage violent video games. The jury is still out on the cost-benefit analysis. Indeed many studies seem to indicate

that violent video games may be linked to aggressive behavior, although cause and effect is questionable. As a general rule, no strangers should be allowed as on-line gaming friends. On-line safety rules should be the same as off -line safety rules. You should also use the ratings on video games to determine their appropriateness. Much like movies, video games contain similar ratings to determine the maturity level advisable for a given player. These ratings take into account foul language and violence. Commonsensemedia.org also has a specific section for video game reviews where parents can get age recommendations and game descriptions before purchase. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children not spend more than one to two hours per day in front of all electronic screens. If your house is anything like mine, this may be a non-issue because our schedule rarely allows that much free time on a daily basis anyway.

Of course, you need to make your own decision for your family as to whether you allow video game time and how much time is acceptable. I would propose that as long as your child is well rounded with physical activities, books, and face to face social interaction, there can be some room, maybe even benefit to video game time. So, before you write off video games completely, solely based on principle, or your mother's warning, take the time to watch, or better yet play, with your children. You can then determine which games are acceptable for them to play. I found that when I asked people who were adamantly against video game play if they ever sat down for any length of time with video games, their answer was almost always no. It's difficult to make a good decision about something unless you've actually experienced it yourself. Happy Gaming!

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