HELP!
MY CHILD IS HOOKED ON VIDEO GAMES

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Contents

Help! Foreword

Addicted—it's a word we typically associate with things like drugs, alcohol, or gambling. But millions of parents in the U.S. are beginning to realize that their child may be addicted to something they *thought* was simply harmless fun.

These parents have confronted the painful reality that their son or daughter is spending countless hours each week glued to a video game console or a gaming Web site. They've noticed disturbing changes in their child's personality—their son seems obsessed with "reaching the next level" or their daughter's friendships are limited to the "virtual" world of an online gaming community.

If you're thinking *That sounds just like*

my child, you've come to the right place.
This book will provide you with the
knowledge and information you need to
help your child. We'll help you determine
if your child's passion for video games is
simply a passing fad or a serious problem
that requires immediate intervention.
We'll educate you on the disturbing link
between violent video games and aggres-
sive behavior. And if you do need to step
in and take control, we'll give you solid
recommendations on how to do it.

We pray that the Lord will guide you
in this process and provide you with the
strength and confidence you need to
"stop the video game madness!"

Dr. Bill Maier
Vice President, Psychologist in Residence
Focus on the Family

Game Wars: Three Tales from the Front

Amy tapped on her son Nathan's bedroom door, and then called out his name. There was no answer. She opened the door, and there sat Nathan, still wearing the same clothes as last night. His eyes were glazed over as he stared at the TV screen, thumbs frantically punching buttons on the wireless game controller.

"Five more minutes," Nathan demanded, his eyes glued to the game.

"You've been playing all morning. That's enough now."

"I just need five more minutes!"

Amy walked to the set and unplugged the game.

"No!" Nathan wailed. "I didn't save it!

Now I'll have to start all over! I hate you!" He threw himself on his bed and pounded his fists in fury.

Amy watched her 11-year-old son, speechless. He hadn't thrown a tantrum like this since he was two. What was wrong with him? It was just a game.

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It was a perfect Saturday afternoon. Joe went to find his son Sam in the hopes that they might have some father-son bonding time. He finally located Sam in the darkened basement. Sam wore a head-set that blocked out all sound; he sat on the floor hunched over, fixing all his attention on the video game in play.

A tap on his shoulder broke the boy's trancelike concentration. "Hey, buddy," said Joe, "let's play catch."

It seemed to take a few seconds for the

words to register. Then Sam replied mechanically, "Sorry, Dad. I'm in a tournament here."

Joe sighed. "Can't you drop out?"

"They need me," said Sam, turning back to the screen.

"Okay," said Joe, trying to hide his disappointment. He noticed his teenager's shaggy hair, dropping below a frayed T-shirt collar. *When was Sam's last haircut?* Joe wondered. *Who are those kids he's playing with? And why do I suddenly feel like a stranger in my son's world?*

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"Look!" said Anne. "Over there. It's a herd of antelope!" She twisted around in the van's front passenger seat to get the attention of the twins in the back. Both girls were engrossed in their handheld video games. "Quick! You'll miss it!"

"Miss what?" asked Molly. She slowly made eye contact with her mother.

"Look out the window! On Gina's side!"

By the time the two girls focused on the great outdoors, the antelope were far behind.

"When I was a kid, we liked to take family trips. But our kids get so bored unless they have their games. All they're seeing on our vacation is a two-inch screen!" Anne complained to her husband, Dave.

"Well, times have changed. At least they're being quiet and not fighting."

"Yeah," said Anne. But she wondered about it. The long drive did go more smoothly with video games, but at what price?

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Do these stories sound familiar? Have you knocked on your child's bedroom door, only to find him or her engrossed in the latest video game? Have you experienced your child's fury over a game unplugged or the grief of an unsaved game lost forever? Does your child make time for video-gaming friends, but not for the family fun you used to share together? Do you wonder about the long-term impact of constant stimulation on young kids? Do you have nagging doubts about whether your child is addicted?

You're not alone.

Contemporary culture is rapidly changing, and kids today have a vast supply of entertainment choices. It's difficult for parents to keep up with everything that's available for kids ranging from toddlers to teens. From movies to music videos to CDs to iPods to the latest video

or computer game, entertainment options are growing with emerging technology, and the video game industry has quickly established itself as a major media outlet. In fact, combined sales of video game hardware and software have already surpassed movies in gross sales.[1] And in a society where what's popular is constantly changing, parents struggle to stay informed in order to make good choices for their families.

The fact that you're reading this book is a sign that you're either hoping to derail a video-game addiction in your family or looking for help for someone who's already glued to the TV or computer. Are you hoping to discover that your child really doesn't have a serious problem, just a bad habit? In these pages, you should find guidance to help you identify how much of a problem video

games are causing in your child's life.

Those dry, bloodshot eyes are not a good sign. Video-game addiction is real and something all parents should take seriously.

Most people consider addiction to be related to substances, mainly drugs or alcohol. But in reality, addiction can consist of anything that becomes such a priority to a person that he or she is willing to neglect friends, family, faith, responsibilities, and even physical health in order to pursue that priority. Electronic games have the potential for this sort of behavioral addiction.

Video and computer games have a profound influence on children in partic-ular because children retain more infor-mation if they learn actively, rather than passively.[2] Video and computer games are totally interactive, meaning that the child

is actively engaged in what is happening on the screen. The addictive nature of video games will be explored in more depth later, but it's clear that they can cause problems in the same way that alcohol and drugs do.

In many cases, playing video games has overtaken people's lives. Gamers lose touch with reality. They push away friends and family because they are consumed with reaching the next level. They act irrationally and lose perspective, just like people with gambling or substance addictions.

As a responsible parent, you've chosen to get involved. In this short book we'll examine the facts about video games, offer suggestions for how to teach your child good habits and how to model good habits yourself, and provide pratical

advice that will enable you to head off an addiction or break an unhealthy pattern that has already become established.

Developing moderation and self-control will change the way your child handles video games and promote new habits that will help him or her succeed in a variety of life situations. A helpful first step is to understand how video games have become so pervasive in today's popular culture.

What Makes Video Games So Popular?

Steve Watters, author of *Internet Addictions*, wrote: "From the beginning, it seems, video games have been addictive. Whether they are guided by knobs, buttons, joysticks, or a computer mouse, they have beckoned users to escape into fantasy worlds populated by race cars, tanks, spaceships, mythical creatures, and more for the past 30 years."[3]

Just as movies and novels do, video games can provide an escape—a place to live out fantasies, to be someone else for just a little while. Video games go a step further because, through their interactive features, players feel involved and in control. Instead of watching a car race on TV, the player can be the one *driving* the car. Why watch a basketball game when you can choose to be any NBA player you want on a video game? With ever-improving technology today, video games can look

almost lifelike, providing an authentic experience.

Video games are everywhere, in console or PC format. PC games are computer based, and many are available online. Computer games are as addictive as console-based video games, and both now offer online features, allowing for interaction with many players at any time of the day or night. Many games are portable, freeing kids to play while walking down the street or riding in the car. They punch buttons on handheld games such as Nintendo Game Boy Advance and Sony PlayStation Portable. Kids can play electronic games on cell phones and iPods. In 2004, sales of portable software game titles broke the $1 billion mark.[4]

The film industry has discovered the value of tying in with video games, and many major motion pictures are trans-

formed into games. Peter Jackson, film director of the popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *King Kong*, worked closely with Ubisoft to create the *King Kong* video game. Movie-based games like the handheld version of *Shrek 2* are extremely popular with younger kids.

Video games such as *Resident Evil* (horror/adventure), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, and *Final Fantasy* have been turned into major motion pictures. Television cartoons such as *Kim Possible* and toy characters including the popular *Bratz* dolls are now offered in handheld video game format. Even classic board games like *Sorry* and *Battleship* are now available as video games.

Just how big are they? According to the NPD Group, 2005 U.S. retail sales of video games, including console and portable hardware and software and

accessories, were over $10.5 billion.[5] Some of the "environments" (game worlds) are as big as medium-sized cities. Estimates of total gamers range from the tens of millions to hundreds of millions worldwide.

There is no doubt that this is a generation immersed in media. The average American child spends 44.5 hours a week in front of a screen, and 83 percent have a video-game console.[6] Many have several kinds of game systems, and this form of entertainment is growing steadily for both children and adults.

Because video games are so pervasive, parents need to be involved and informed. A useful parental tool is the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating system:

EC (early childhood). Content is suitable for ages three and up.

E (everyone). Content is suitable for ages six and up.

T (teen). Content is suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain mild language, violence, and sexually suggestive themes. Parents should use discretion.

M (mature). Identification required for purchase. Games rated M are sold only to gamers over the age of 17. Material in this category may include sexual themes, violence, and strong language.

AO (adults only). Identification required for purchase. These games are restricted to persons over 18 and are often sold only in specific game stores. Material may include graphic sexual scenes, strong language, and intense violence.[7] Seriously consider whether this material is appropriate even for you or your spouse.

Remember, as the parent you want to model good decision making to your

children. In spite of the availability of ratings, 90 percent of teens say their parents "never" check the ratings before allowing them to buy or rent video games.[8]

Control is the key. The video game phenomenon can add to your family's life if used in a controlled setting, or it can invade your home and take over the lives of vulnerable family members.

What Are the Dangers Inherent in Video Games?

Brian and Jenny were playing their new video game in the living room when Dad, casually reading the paper in the kitchen, overheard their conversation.

"You did that on purpose!" Jenny cried.

"Ha! You're too slow. You have to fight faster," Brian laughed.

Dad decided to move closer to see what the kids were playing. He settled into an easy chair and watched the game as they played. He recognized the open package on the coffee table, a birthday gift for Brian that had been at the top of his wish list. Dad's eyes widened as the character on the screen moved through crowds, holding a shotgun and shooting randomly. The character paused, pointed the gun at a victim's head, and pulled the trigger.

Dad's jaw dropped when he realized Brian was manipulating the character. Brian was the shooter! Dad grabbed the empty game case and quickly read the cautions, wishing he'd taken the time to do so earlier.

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A major concern is the increasingly violent and sexual content of video games.

Though not all games are bad, extreme caution is required. Some games are educational and just plain fun (with parental involvement and monitoring). But other games such as *Grand Theft Auto* that have a rating of M or worse celebrate brutality, violence, drugs, and even prostitution. In fact, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* was originally released with an M rating, but was changed to AO after it was discovered that the game contained hidden sex scenes.

Even before this discovery, players could manipulate characters to have sex with prostitutes out of view, but unlocking this code allowed players to engage in a graphic sexual mini-game. The rating was changed to AO and stores such as Wal-Mart and Target pulled the game from their shelves.

Many M-rated games include first-

person shooters, meaning the player is initiating the action. It becomes more personal than games where the player is just manipulating characters. In first-person games, the player himself acts out forms of violence. According to the American Psychology Association (APA), perpetrators of violence in video games go unpunished 73 percent of the time. Elizabeth Carll, cochair of the APA Committee on Violence in Video Games, states, "Showing violent acts without consequences teaches youth that violence is an effective means of resolving conflict. Whereas, seeing pain and suffering as a consequence can inhibit aggressive behavior."[9]

The National Institute on Media and the Family publishes an annual report that cautions parents on the top games containing sexual and violent graphics (www.mediafamily.org). In 2004, three of

the top 10 video-game titles (ranked by sales) were *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Halo*, and *Halo 2*.[10] Each of these games is rated M and has extreme violence.

While games like these are supposed to be off limits to children, their sheer popularity causes kids to find ways to access them. In fact, a 2004 study by the Federal Trade Commission found that 69 percent of young teens who tried to purchase M-rated games were successful.[11] And 78 percent of adolescent boys claim that an M-rated game is one of their favorites.[12]

In some cases, however, the government is getting involved. Governor Arnold Schwarzeneggar, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Senator Joseph Lieberman are among the politicians who have pursued legislation to restrict minors' access to M-rated games. Several

states have attempted to pass legislation concerning minors' access to M-rated games; however, the free-speech argument has prevented many of these laws from going into effect.

Regardless of government involvement, or lack thereof, parents still have the responsibility when it comes to what's appropriate for their home. If you determine that your child already has a game that's too violent or graphic or contains questionable language, you have the right to take it away and forbid your child to play it. Be the parent, not your child's pal. Your child *needs* you to look out for his best interest.

New software permits parents to regulate computer-based video games using ratings systems. Sony and Microsoft have placed parental controls using ratings in their latest versions of PlayStation and

Xbox. Parental controls are also offered on the online aspect of Xbox 360: Xbox Live. These types of controls allow parents

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After a series of school shootings, violent video games drew special attention. Authorities found that the shooters, almost without exception, were big fans of point-and-shoot games. That sparked debate over the games' ability to fuel real-life hostility. Recent research shows that playing violent games can increase aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Does that mean every guy who plays Duke Nukem will turn into a cold-blooded killer? No way. That's unrealistic. But it would be equally foolish to pretend that there's no risk from games that stimulate endorphins, encourage brutality, and then reward violence—a potent combination.[13]

to limit multiplayer options and filter downloads, but every family is different. The ESRB standards may not match your personal standards, so you still need to be actively involved in monitoring the entertainment outlets in your home.

Desensitizing Effects

According to online press releases from the APA, researchers at Saint Leo University found that after playing violent video games for a short period of time, young people experienced an increase in aggressive behavior.

One study showed participants who played a violent game for less than 10 minutes rate themselves with aggressive traits and aggressive actions shortly after playing.

In another study of over 600 8th

and 9th graders, the children who spent more time playing violent video games were rated by their teachers as more hostile than other children in the study. The children who played more violent video games had more arguments with authority figures and were more likely to be involved in physical altercations with other students. They also performed more poorly on academic tasks.[14]

Research has also found that boys tend to play video games for longer periods of time than girls. It's possible that because women are often portrayed in secondary and even degrading roles in video games, girls have less incentive to play.

Though there are documented cases of deaths that can be linked to excessive video game playing, the most common

danger is to a young person's emotional and spiritual health. Certainly any minor habit given the necessary elements can deepen into a dangerous addiction. Some gamers have claimed they are unable to break the hold video games have on them; the attraction to them is too strong.

If left unchecked, compulsive behavior can lead to serious problems. A parent needs to focus not only on the depth of a child's habit or addiction, but also on the underlying issue behind why video games have such a tight hold. The key question to ask is: What is driving my child to seek out these games? The answer might help determine whether or not your child is severely addicted to game playing.

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