

Video Games: The Newest Plague

A mother of a boy, 11, I was treating recently spoke about a “play date” her son had. As had been arranged, the mother of the other boy brought the child over to the house around 1 pm. The two boys greeted each other at the door and immediately proceeded to the bedroom, where they began playing video games.

During the play date this mother occasionally checked on the boys. At every check mother observed them sitting nearly motionless, staring at the screen; the only part of their bodies which moved were their thumbs, as they actively operated their respective controls. Every now and then, mother heard a loud, grunting sound, as one of the boys presumably killed a monster or won or lost a game segment.

Around 4:30 pm the other mother returned to retrieve her son. That boy thanked his friend and his friend’s mother for “the nice time” and departed. The play date, which lasted over four hours, consisted of sitting passively, except for madly wiggling their thumbs, staring at a video screen, and occasionally emitting unintelligible verbalizations.

Video games are like crack cocaine to today’s youth. Many, many children spend untold hours involved with these electronic games, often from the time they come home from school until they, finally, go to bed. Far too many kids spend essentially entire weekends (and some spend their summer breaks) playing these “games.” I regularly hear reports from parents that their children engage in “gaming” to the neglect of homework, reading, eating with the family, or going out with the family; these kids will throw major temper tantrums, if their parent attempts to curtail their video game involvement.

To say that video gaming is addictive to some kids is not an exaggeration. These games are brightly colored, quite visually and auditorily stimulating, very life-like, and, most importantly, are self-regulated. Kids whom are unable to sit and concentrate for five minutes in school, will spend an entire afternoon alone in their room focused on a video game.

Unquestionably, children of previous generations, watched too much TV—this writer included. Nevertheless, these TV-watching kids managed to frequently pull themselves from the “boob tube” to get out and interact—socialize—with peers. Today’s video gamers are socially isolated. If they do play a game conjointly, as in the above example, the interaction in no way can be considered as socializing. Kids today, because of video games, simply do not have the same opportunities to learn social skills as did kids of previous generations.

Those TV-watching kids of yesteryear also managed to occasionally get out and play and be active. Nevertheless, current data on the epidemic of obesity in US adults (60%) suggests that the early bad habit of excessive TV-watching may be part of the reason adults today fail to exercise. Thus, if the previous generation of TV-watchers are now obese, even though they got some exercise as kids, what can we expect from the current

generation of kids whom are not active even as children?! In 15-20 years we are going to see some of the largest “tushes” known to man—but their thumbs will be long and lean. (Some newer games encourage activity, interestingly, but their use is in the minority.)

Finally, and most significantly, we must consider the medium of these games to which are kids are addicted. Are our kids playing learning games? Absolutely not!! The overwhelming majority of these video games involve violence—graphic violence, replete with life-like blood and gore. While I was in the process of writing this article, I was watching a sporting event while on the stationary bike (filling two needs at once) and a commercial came on touting a new wrestling video game entitled “HeadCrusher.”

In the 1970’s and well into ‘80’s numerous research studies were conducted concerning the psychological effect excessive TV-watching had on kids. I recall several studies in which it was reported that by the time an average child in the ‘80’s became an adolescent, he/she had been exposed to an amazing number of murders and assaults, etc. Those numbers absolutely pale in comparison to the amount of death and debauchery inherent in most popular video games today.

Recently in the Valley, two male teens shot a young adult man in the back of the head with a shotgun, reportedly without saying a word, because they needed his car to go to party. Now I am not going to argue that video games caused this tragedy. However, as a psychologist, when I read such reports I wonder what must have gone on in the lives of these two adolescents for them to engage in such heinous behavior. Could electronically killing thousands of “aliens,” monsters, or “bad guys” over hundreds of hours of video gaming distort a young person’s values or reality or desensitize them to the value of life? I am waiting for the first defense attorney to use the “Gamer’s Syndrome” as a means to defend their client.

Every older generation thinks the younger generation is “going to hell in a hand-basket.” I remember when I got into the Beatles and my mother, somehow, thought I had “lost my religion.” Having worked with hundreds of children over the past 30+ years, I have become truly worried about the impact video games are having on our youth. I am fearful that soon we will have a generation of under-socialized, impulsive, impatient, entitled, apathetic, obese young adults. To this health professional, video games are the newest plague.

I cannot tell you how many kids today tell me that they want to become video game “designers” or “engineers” when they grow up. Is this what our kids should aspire to? I recently did a bit of research and learned only about 100 such jobs are available, primarily in the Bay area.

I do not think Osama bin Laden is hiding out in some cave in Afghanistan. I believe he has become one of those “engineers” in the Bay area designing more of those violent, mind-numbing video games which are addicting and harming our youth.

Parents, toss out the X-Box or, at least, limit its use. Take a walk or hike with you child. Take a bike ride. Do something fun, active, interactive—and loving. It will be good for you and your child.

Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP is a licensed psychologist who has practiced in the Paradise Valley area of Phoenix for 32 years. He works with children, adolescents, parents, adults, and couples. He also provides forensic consultations in the areas of family law, personal injury, and estate planning. He speaks professionally to laypersons, educators, and fellow mental health professionals. He teaches graduate courses for the Educational Psychology Department for Northern Arizona University. He is the author of “Who’s Raising Whom? A Parent’s Guide to Effective Child Discipline,” “Coping With Your Adolescent,” “How Come I Love Him But Can’t Live With Him? Making Your Marriage Work Better,” and “The Graduate Course You Never Had: How to Develop, Manage, Market a Flourishing Private Practice—With and Without Managed Care.” His contact information is: 602-996-8619; 11020 N. Tatum Blvd., Bldg E, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85028; LarryWaldmanPhD@cox.net; TopPhoenixPsychologist.com.