

# What Video Games Teach

*recognizing the benefits of gaming* by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

**M**any parents I see in my practice are concerned about their children's video game playing. A recent study found that 91 percent of children between the ages of 2 and 17 play video games, and another study found that upwards of 99 percent of teenage boys and 94 percent of teenage girls play the games.

Many people believe that video games have a negative impact on children; however, a paper in the January 2014 issue of *American Psychologist* argues that a more balanced perspective is needed. In "The Benefits of Playing Video Games," researchers write that it is important to understand the potential benefits of game playing if we want to really understand how they affect the development of children and teen.

We know that play in general is valuable for children's development. It provides an important arena where kids can practice being adults. They get to take on different personas, express feelings, and work out conflicts that they may be experiencing in real life. During play, children deal with themes such as power and dominance, aggression, nurturance, anxiety, pain, loss, growth, and joy. We need to recognize that video games give children and adolescents the same opportunities.

The researchers reviewed studies that have been conducted on the benefits of video game playing, looking at four main areas: motivation (e.g. resilience in the face of failure), emotional (e.g., mood management), social (e.g., pro-social behavior), and cognitive (e.g., attention). I would like to share findings in a couple of these areas.

Video games seem to help teach children an effective motivational style.

In video games kids work toward meaningful goals, learn to persevere even when faced with many failures, and experience positive feelings when they complete challenging tasks. These are certainly attributes we want our children to learn. How does video gaming do this?

One of the concepts the article discusses has to do with a child's beliefs about himself. It is known that children who are praised for their traits come to believe that their intelligence is fixed. When they face failure, they do not believe that there is much that they can do about it. Instead of saying to a child, "Wow, you are smart!" it is best to praise their effort, "Wow, you worked hard at that!" Children who are given that kind of feedback come to believe that their abilities can be developed and improved with effort and time.

Research suggests that video games give children and teens positive feedback that is based on their efforts. The games provide players concrete, immediate feedback about the specific efforts that they make. The best video games are particularly good at this because they keep kids in their "sweet spot." This is the place where a balance exists between challenge and frustration, providing enough success and accomplishment that the child stays engaged. The game is continuously teaching the kids that they have the ability to positively be in charge of their lives.

Studies have also shown that gaming may be one of the most efficient means by which children and youth generate positive feelings. If a child is in a down mood, playing a video game can help them get into a better mood. Gaming also seems to help children learn to deal with negative emotions. For example, although gaming often results in short-term frustration and anxiety, gaming also

provides children plenty of opportunities to practice controlling or modulating their emotions in order to reach their goals in the game. If they don't learn to control their frustration when playing, they won't do well in the game.

Over time, as children get through one challenge and on to the next, they learn to control the frustration and anxiety that is bound to occur. The hope is that these same skills learned while gaming will transfer into "real" life. As of yet, research has not been designed that can clearly study whether this transfer takes place.

These are just some of the points made in this interesting paper. I appreciate how the researchers are studying video gaming and the positive ways in which games can affect children and adolescents. As I think about my work with families, I will be sure to reinforce the good lessons that game playing can have. I can see how a child who has poor frustration tolerance might be mo-

tivated to work on that skill, knowing it is important if they want to get better at gaming. At the same time, I can reassure parents that gaming itself can give the child needed practice in this area and build self-confidence along the way. ●

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