The "I'd Rather Inventory" For Digital Wellbeing

Spark & Stitch Institute
Ignite Courage and Connection with Kids

What's the difference between liking gaming and over-use?

Most young people spend a lot of time with their devices. The overwhelming majority of these young people also do their homework, keep up their responsibilities, and have other interests. Yet adults and young people alike report feeling increasingly concerned that technology takes up too much time and attention in their lives.

Does this mean that young people are at risk of being addicted? It depends upon whom you ask. There is significant disagreement among clinicians and researchers about whether video game addiction warrants a clinical diagnosis. In 2013 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) did decide that internet gaming disorder warranted further research and study while the World Health Organization recently included "gaming disorder" in the International Classification of Diseases.

Is video game addiction real?

Researchers studying the issue have come up with a variety of terms for the problem including pathological play, compulsive internet use, or problematic internet use, among others. It has also been hard to pin down the scale and scope of video game addiction. One review of studies focusing on American adolescents and college students found a range from zero to 26% for problematic Internet use reflecting a range of definitions, measures, and samples.

We won't go into the challenges that make drawing conclusions about internet addiction complicated. However, while researchers continue to learn more and debate the diagnostic approach, it is clear that a small percentage of young people do need help. These are not just young people who really like playing video games or going online. These are young people for whom the Internet or gaming has interfered with their ability to function and thrive.

More Accurate Language: Problematic Interactive Media Use

As opposed to talking about video game addiction, Dr. Michael Rich at the Center for Media and Child Health prefers to talk with families and adolescents about Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU). He argues that it is less stigmatizing and opens up important conversations not only about gaming but about information seeking, online pornography, and social media as well.

If you are worried that tech has taken over your child's daily life, look for warning signs including poorer personal hygiene, decrease in school performance and social withdrawal.

If you are worried

There is no need to panic that your child is becoming addicted just because they spend a lot of time online or you have power struggles over games. On the other hand, don't ignore signs of a real problem if you see them. On the next page you will find your I'd Rather Inventory for Digital Wellbeing. While this is not a diagnostic tool, it is a helpful "first pass" to help you determine whether or not gaming or Internet use is becoming a problem.

"I'd Rather" Inventory

David Walsh, Ph.D.

Check each statement you agree with. Feel free to replace video games with phone, Internet, or social media in the statements below.

____I'd rather play video games than be with my friends.

____I'd rather play video games than play sports or go to school clubs.

____I'd rather play video games than spend time with my family.

____I'd rather play video games than eat.

____I'd rather play video games than sleep.

____I'd rather play video games than talk on the phone or text.

____I'd rather play video games than go to school or work.

____I'd rather play video games than go to a movie.

____I'd rather play video games than watch TV.

____I'd rather play video games than use the Internet.

____I'd rather play video games than listen to music.

____I'd rather play video games than move my body.

List the things you'd rather do than play video games:

1._____
2._____
3._____

If a child has trouble thinking of anything they would rather do than play video games (or go online, etc) or it is taking priority over important life functions, it may be a sign of problematic over-use. This is not a diagnostic tool but a simple and helpful "first pass" to see how important gaming or the Internet has become in a child's life. Internet or gaming over-use often occurs alongside other diagnoses so be sure to follow up with a trusted professional to learn more about what might be going on for your child and make a specific plan that works for your family. We've also created this Internet Addiction Symptom Checklist that you can run through to see if you think your child might need extra support.

If you don't think your child needs professional help but your family wants to get tech back in balance, check out the next page for some ideas of where to begin!

1

Set limits where they count most

We'd be better off focusing on one or two strategic changes rather than walking around the house unplugging devices in a fit of frustration. Consider starting in the places where the research says we get the most benefits from going screen free. Make your choices in consideration not only of what you don't want but what you do want as well. For example:

- **Meal times** (connection)
- **Bedtime** (restoration)
- **Study time** (focus)
- **Play time or exercise/movement time** (emotional regulation, connection, stress recovery)

2

Use the "3 Cs" to make a family media plan with your child.

Researchers Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingston argue that making family plans around screen time that focus only on minutes and limits risks positioning parents as simply time-keepers and "enforcers" rather than media mentors. Instead, research suggests that managing and supporting your child's media use around the "3 Cs" can shift that dynamic and shape better outcomes for kids:

- **Contexts.** When, where, and how will your child use the device?
- **Content.** What will they consume, watch, and engage with?
- **Connections.** How will you make sure that device use doesn't get in the way of relationships and connections – both offline and online?

Decide in advance which boundaries are going to be negotiable and which you will decide with your child. For example, you might determine that a tech curfew is non-negotiable but be willing to learn more about a new app or game together with your child before you decide if it is appropriate. Use Common Sense Media to find ratings and reviews and don't be afraid to use apps and tools to help reflect on and manage screen time together. Make sure as you work through these concepts that you aren't just focused on what might go wrong but also name the things that you hope go right by naming what everyone is most excited about. Record your family commitments and ideas in your family media plan.

3

Balance control-based strategies with connection-based strategies.

When it comes to digital media, children benefit from a balance of control-based and connection-based strategies. Here is what a control-based strategy sounds like, "When this video is over, it is time to put your tablet away!" In contrast, here is what a connection-based strategy sounds like, "I noticed the kids in that video weren't being very nice to each other. What do you think about that?"

Our use of parental controls is an important place to make sure we balance these two approaches as well. Monitoring can be used as simply a control-based strategy (install, catch, and punish), but when done well, can open up opportunities for conversation, reflection, and problem solving.

On balance, we might lean towards control-based strategies with young children and then prioritize connection-based strategies with older teens. For example, you can limit a younger child to a very controlled and limited "safe playground" online of only a few approved apps and games. As your child grows up, connection-based strategies like talking to them about what they are seeing and doing become increasingly essential. All of our kids, regardless of age, benefit from both clear boundaries and our engagement in their digital lives.