**Parent Corner**

A few years ago a parent asked me this question: *I have a seven year old boy who has always enjoyed video games. To be honest, my husband and I do too. Lately, my son, has been asking for some of the more popular games and sometimes he wants to play with other people through the internet. I was talking about this with some of the other parents. About 50% of us think its fine, it’s an electronic world now. But the other parents feel strongly that it will be dangerous for our kids. What do you think?*

Flash forward to March 2020 when the schools shut down to maintain health and safety. During this difficult and complex time, our children are on their chrome books for lessons, assignments etc. Adults are on our devices to work from home or to attempt to stay in contact with friends and relatives. My answer below remains the same except that we now have to monitor our children’s “gaming” even more closely because of all the additional “working” on line.

I will be posting thoughts and suggestions on my link on the Tiogue webpage. Please feel free to ask me any questions about parenting topics that you may be struggling with. I am also available for private sessions with you or your child. The world will go back to normal. We shall return to school and go outside again. As we wait, we all may experience stress from time to time. It helps to reach out!

It is not really about what I think, but more about what the research shows. You are 100% correct-we are an electronic world. You are also correct about how people feel in regard to this. Infant toys are now widely electronic when in fact, studies of the brain show that a $4.00 book containing pictures of black and white shapes encourages brain growth during the first month more effectively than the $50.00 electronic toys that are available.

Some video games have been shown to have multiple positive effects. Dr. Randy Kulman has researched the effects of non-violent video games on children with ADHD and Learning Disorders. Dr. Kulman, president and founder of *LearningWorks* indicates that children learn from play. This includes your first game of pee-a-boo with your infant to playing board games with your elementary age children. Learning the rules of a simple game have long lasting, positive effects on the brain.

“The latest research shows that play exercises the brain in much the same way that sports exercise the body. When a child plays soccer for fun, their body still benefits from the physical activity. Similarly, when a child plays games for fun, their brain still benefits from the cognitive tasks and challenges in the game”. Digital play can have the same positive effects on the brain as any other type of play.

According to Douglas A. Gentile, PhD. (Research on the Effects of Media), there are four major effects of media violence:

1. The **aggressor effect**: Watching a lot of entertainment violence tends to predict increased aggressive thoughts, increased aggressive feelings, and increased aggressive behaviors
2. The **victim effect**: Watching a lot of entertainment violence tends to predict increased fearfulness, increased beliefs about the likelihood that violence might occur, and increased self-protective behaviors.
3. The **bystander effect:** Watching a lot of entertainment violence predicts increased desensitization, both to other media violence and also to aggression in the real world
4. The **appetite effect**: Simply put, the more you watch, the more you want to watch.
5. Dr. Gentile indicates that the scientific issue is not *whether* there are effects, but which of these effects are most likely to occur. The effects will vary depending upon the type of media content, the individual characteristics of the viewer, when the individual is viewing.

Dr. Gentile states that there are at least five effects of violent video game play:

1. Increased aggressive thoughts
2. Increased aggressive feelings
3. Increased physiological arousal
4. Increased aggressive behavior
5. Decreased positive social behavior

It would be short-sighted to eliminate electronics completely because children are constantly exposed in our technologically advanced world. As we discussed, some exposure to appropriate video games can actually enhance brain growth. The following recommendations will help make sure that your children are able to live happy, balanced lives.

* Using videos to get ready for bed is not a good idea even if it seems to calm your child. The body’s inner clock responds to light as the signal for waking and sleeping. An electronic screen generates as much light as the noon sun. Different types of electronics impact our sensory system and brain differently. Watching TV is passive whereas the IPad or video games are interactive. This stimulates the brain. I personally feel that all electronics should stop at least 30 minutes prior to bed. This is a great time to read or listen to quiet music.
* Social interactions that are face to face are critical for a number of reasons. They teach children to observe non-verbal information such as facial expressions or body language. Vocabulary is typically enhanced because through conversation children learn new things and can ask directly if they do not understand. Verbal interactions also teach children how to listen, wait to speak and remain on topic. Marcia Eckerd, PhD, suggest that parents “limit screen time when children are young**.** Some researchers recommend limiting screen use to 30 minutes at a time, with a 5 to 1 ratio of non-screen time to screen time for very young children. Allowing unlimited screen time is like letting toothpaste out of the tube. You won’t be able to put it back. Setting limits early enables you to limit time later so your child will actually play with friends, be part of the family at dinner, and not binge during homework time”.
* It is important to think about the educational value of what you’re allowing your child to see**.**  [Commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org/) rates games, videos, etc. in terms of educational value and appropriateness for different ages.
* Make sure your child has electronics-free solo playtime**.** A child needs to learn to entertain herself. Children who are “addicted” to the immediate gratification of fast-paced electronics often complain of boredom when asked to rely on their own creativity or interests. It is also important to avoid electronics on play dates.
* Many of us enjoy having a TV on in the background as we go about our day. This is not recommended. I have always had great success with music. You can sing and dance with your children while engaging in day to day activities.

Dr. Eckerd indicates that the most important consideration in this area is to monitor your own use of electronics.  “Are you on your phone at dinner with your child? Are you attending to your child’s play or your text messages? With adults this is rude; with children this is deprivation. It is also bad role-modeling and poor parenting. No other words for it. In this electronics-driven world, we need to carefully balance children’s developmental needs with the lure of technology as entertainment, education, and babysitter. There are real reasons for caution—there are already 4-year-olds being treated for screen addictions. Children are using screens at a younger and younger age, so parents must think about what they will and won’t allow.”

*Marcia Eckerd is an evaluator, consultant, and therapist who specializes in working with children with NLD and autism-spectrum disorders.*