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Expert Tips On Buying Video Games

ISU psychologists offer parental advice on promoting kids' healthy video game play.

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Parents often find themselves in a holiday quandary when deciding on which video games to purchase for their kids. They know that their children want video games, but they also want to ensure that they are giving gifts that are good for their children.

So what's a parent to do this holiday season? Iowa State University Distinguished Professor Craig Anderson and Assistant Professor Doug Gentile - leading experts on the effects of video games on young people - have some ideas.

Authors ,with Katherine Buckley, of the book "Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents", Anderson and Gentile say that video game ratings are a good starting point for parents when shopping for games. But they don't tell the whole story.

"Parents and researchers initially believed that what mattered most about violent games was how realistic and bloody they were. Our research now suggests that what matters most is whether you have to harm other characters to advance in the game," Gentile said. "Increased aggression may result from practicing harming others, even if it is unrealistic or cartoonish."

The professors' research has shown that children can learn from the content presented in the video game -- whether it is positive or negative.

"If they play drums in 'Beatles Rock Band,' they will get better at drums. If the kids play games where you have to harm other characters, then they become more willing to use aggressive tactics," said Gentile. Anderson and Gentile have also found that non-violent "prosocial" video games can teach kids to be more cooperative and helpful to others. And they say there are a number of video game genres that usually have positive effects, including:

Music simulation games - "Beatles Rock Band" or "Guitar Hero 5"

Movement Games - "Wii Fit Plus" or "Mario & Sonic at the Winter Olympic Games"

Puzzle or Trivia Games - "Trivial Pursuit" or "Scene It?"

Prosocial Games - "The Sims 3" or "Animal Crossing: City Folk"

There are also games that the ISU researchers reports have little positive or negative content, but are simply fun.

"Most sports games, except the ones that feature violence; many simulation games; and many racing games are like this and are fine for children and adolescents," said Anderson.

According to Anderson, the key is whether or not the game requires the player to harm other game characters in order to advance the game. He offers the following advice to parents before making a video game purchase for their child:

Play the game, have someone else demonstrate it for you, or look at clips from the game on the game's Web site.

Then ask yourself the following questions:

Does the game involve some characters trying to harm others?

Does this happen frequently, more than once or twice in 30 minutes?

Is the harm rewarded in any way?

Is the harm portrayed as humorous?

Are non-violent solutions absent or less "fun" than the violent ones?

Are realistic consequences of violence absent from the game?

Two or more "yes" answers should cause parents to think carefully about the lessons being taught before purchasing that game for children, Anderson said.

"Although playing violent video games on an occasional basis is unlikely to produce any long-term harmful consequences, repeated exposure to violent entertainment media of any type is an important risk factor for later aggressiveness," said Anderson. "Parents need to carefully examine the content of video games before allowing their children to use them."

The growing popularity of video games has led to more parents playing them with their children. But the ISU researchers say simply playing along is not enough to ensure a child's safety. In fact, it may enhance both the positive and negative effects.

"Parents should explain to kids that violence is not an appropriate way to solve problems and explain you should not act this way in real life," Anderson noted. "This is an excellent opportunity for parents to teach their children values and lessons in real life."

"Actively questioning and discussing the content of media is a powerful parenting tool," Gentile said. "Getting children to think critically about why the content can be harmful can lead to healthier outcomes for children."



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