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Video gaming is a stress release valve and not a sign of mental illness

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By Chang Kwun-hei(HK Edition)

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Addiction to video games has been officially defined as a mental disorder by the World Health Organization.

Between March and May 2018, a survey by the University of Hong Kong on 2,000 primary 4 to 6 students found these children played video games 3.6 days a week and spent eight hours a week on average playing video games. These indicate around 10 percent of upper primary students could be classified as being addicted to video gaming.

"Children's physical health, mental health, and daily functioning may be impaired. For the well-being of our next generation, some effective preventive measures must be implemented to reduce the risk of gaming addiction among children," argues the HKU's Department of Psychology's social and health psychology laboratory.

On the one hand, some experts point to survey data throwing up apparently worrying correlations between increased screen time and increased mental health problems. On the other hand, other experts disagree. For example, Orben and Przybylski (2019) found a handful of statistically significant correlations between screen time and well-being, but argued that the association between video gaming and increased mental health problems is "too small to merit substantial scientific discussion".

Other recent research also suggested that more screen time and gaming play a role in increasing mental illness. In fact, some children who spend a lot of time video gaming described it as being supportive and that the online community is helping them manage their mental health difficulties.

Based on my own clinical experience, most of my teenage clients who are suffering from "gaming addiction" do not see their addiction as a serious problem. Their problems are usually related to academic stress, peer relationships, family conflicts, low self-esteem, bullying, etc. They usually show symptoms of anxiety and depression and see gaming as a way for them to "get away". My view on this is that video gaming is a stress release safety valve rather than as a cause of mental illness. "Safety behavior" is coping behavior used to reduce anxiety and fear when the user feels threatened.

So when treating video gaming as a disorder, it is not about seeing gaming as a problem. We should assist these children to see what they are losing as a result of playing too many video games. For example, when these children are online and playing video games a lot, what are they not doing? Typically they are not spending enough time hanging out with friends, parents or going outside. We should use video gaming to get into their world and communicate with them on their level - replace this safety behavior with a more functional one. I am not arguing that playing video games is 100 percent beneficial for children and teens, but suggesting that we should look beyond video gaming. Perhaps, we should look at changing some things at home and making adjustments in the current education approach used in our schools.

Chang Kwun-hei

The author is an experienced UK-trained psychologist/mental health therapist who specializes in working with children, teenagers and families with mental health issues and conflicts.

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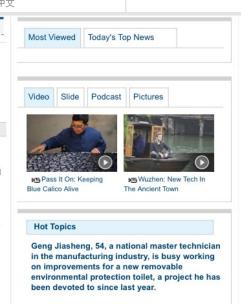
Here are some tips for parents to build good screen-time habits at home:

Setting aside certain times where everyone must put down their electronic devices, such as at the dinner table, or in bed. There might not be a definite link between screen time and mental problem per se, but a lot of recent research does suggest too much screen time can lead to suppressing the production of melatonin (a hormone secreted by the pineal gland) and you need melatonin to fall sleep. Even having the device in the room has an impact on your sleep due to the "nagging effect" - "is there any Instagram or Facebook notification for me?", "has my boss replied to my email yet?", and so on. Therefore, keeping all electronic devices away from the bedroom at nighttime is definitely a healthy habit to practice.

According to a new survey by Common Sense Media, while most parents think they are encouraging healthy screen time behavior for their children, they are actually glued to their own smart phones, tablets, and TVs for more than nine hours a day. And only an hour and 30 minutes of that time is for work purpose. Parents are the most important role model for their children. Showing your child how you use the media, how you use technology and how much you use it is critically important.

Take 20 minutes every night to spend some one-on-one quality time with your children, talk about anything, and play with anything. Let them know that this can also be relaxing and stimulating without screens.

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