

Why Videogames Trigger the Nightly Meltdown—and How to Help Your Child Cope

As many parents know, turning off a child's gaming console in the middle of gameplay is a surefire way to trigger a tantrum. Just because it's hard for your kids to put down the game controllers doesn't mean they're addicts. Here's what happens in their brains the second after the game shuts off.

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Every night, parents around the globe fight a battle of wills when they tell their kids to power down their game consoles to do homework, eat dinner or go to bed. The directive is usually met with some serious side-eye and whining.

In some cases, children yell, throw tantrums or slam doors. No one likes to be forced to stop having fun, but something unique appears to be going on here—you don't hear much about kids having epic meltdowns when they're told to stop playing with Legos.

So, what's happening in that moment, the forced transition from game play to real life?

Children and adolescents don't yet have the capability to stop doing a rewarding activity and move on to something less fun, neurologists say. That doesn't mean a child is addicted to videogames. Although experts say children with depression and anxiety are more prone to immerse themselves in games as a coping mechanism, it's just generally hard for most kids to stop. There are ways for parents to hack this problem, but first they have to understand their kids' minds.

“What's happening in our brains is that there are systems that evolved to sustain our interest. It will lead you to seek food for days until you find it, and that's followed by satiety,” said Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the National Institutes of Health, who has studied similarities between the effects of gaming and substance abuse.

Pulling the plug in the middle of a videogame—before a child has had the chance to feel satisfied by completing a level or mission—is a bit like yanking a half-eaten doughnut out of someone's hand.

The anticipation of playing videogames results in a roughly 75% boost to baseline dopamine levels in the brain, according to Chris Ferguson, a psychology professor at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., who has analyzed studies on gaming. That's far less than the boost associated with doing hard drugs, according to data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, but it's not much higher than the boost that comes from that doughnut.

Eating the doughnut is a finite act, however. Videogame makers build in a stream of intermittent rewards to keep people playing. In some games, there's no real end or it can take hours to achieve.

A 1998 study involving adult gamers found that dopamine release correlated to how the players progressed—the better they got and the more difficult the challenges became, the more dopamine was released, said the study’s author, Matthias Koepp, now a neurology professor at the University College London Queen Square Institute of Neurology.

Accurately measuring dopamine in the brain is a challenge and can involve injections of radioactive materials that can be tracked on a PET scan. That’s why there haven’t been many studies—and none performed on children.

While adults have the reasoning ability to override the dopamine rush and move on to other, more important tasks, kids do not, neurologists say. The brain’s prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain involved in making decisions and controlling impulses—isn’t fully developed until age 25.

Amirah Counts, a single mom in Boulder, Colo., struggles most nights to get her 7-year-old son to stop playing “World of Warcraft.”

“On a good day, he gets home from school and the rule is to do homework first, but as soon as he’s done, he wants to play videogames. If I tell him no, he’ll just sit there and not do anything. It’s like he doesn’t have the capacity to entertain himself,” she said. “A bad night is when we just come home, and I’m so exhausted I let him play videogames until bedtime and then he’s livid when it’s time for bed.”

“There is no intrinsic reason a child should stop playing on his own, unless there is a more rewarding experience available at that moment,” said Marc Palaus, who reviewed more than 100 papers on the neural and behavioral effects of videogaming while working on a Ph.D. in cognitive neuroscience at the Open University of Catalonia.

When Chris Fuller’s son was in sixth grade, he would plow through his homework so he could play “Fortnite,” the popular Internet game where a hundred players battle to be the last one standing. The boy’s homework quality and grades began to slip. “What drove me to complete madness was he’d turn off one device and go to another. He would get off ‘Fortnite’ and come upstairs with us and get on his phone to watch YouTube videos about ‘Fortnite,’” said Mr. Fuller, a public relations executive in Alpharetta, Ga.

He and his wife stopped allowing their son to play videogames on weeknights when he started 7th grade last fall and Mr. Fuller said that’s resulted in better-quality homework and an improvement in grades. But on weekends, their son, now 13, has moved on to “Overwatch,” another online multiplayer game he has a hard time shutting off.

“I recently heard something at 5 a.m. and went downstairs and found him playing,” he said.

Experts say most kids who play videogames are not at risk of developing a serious problem such as “gaming disorder,” which the World Health Organization says is a pattern of behavior characterized by “impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities ... and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative

consequences.” The frequency or duration of game-playing alone doesn’t equate to having a disorder. Only less than 1% of gamers qualify for such a diagnosis, experts say.

Some experts, including the leadership of the American Psychiatric Association, say there’s not enough evidence yet to even declare gaming addiction a unique disorder.

Rather than worrying about whether or not your kids are addicted to gaming, psychologists suggest figuring out whether they use videogames to cope with depression, anxiety or stress. A 2017 study found that adolescents who played videogames four or more hours a day for six or seven days a week showed more depressive symptoms than those who played less often.

What You—and Your Child—Can Do

Even when an underlying mental-health issue is not at play, many parents face surly kids when it’s game-over time. So how can you manage the nightly battle?

*** Institute rules around game play—and follow them consistently.** “Don’t let yourself fall into these traps, like, ‘Well, he didn’t play last week so we let him play an extra three hours this week,’” said Michael Milham, vice president of research and founding director of the Center for the Developing Brain at the Child Mind Institute.

Some experts advise parents to warn kids about 20 minutes before it’s time to shut down so they know what to expect and don’t begin a new level or mission. Dr. Milham suggests not letting kids play videogames right up until bedtime, because some have trouble settling down to sleep.

*** Give your children a role in creating the rules.** Susan Groner, a parenting coach and author, said children are more invested in following guidelines when they have a hand in developing them. If you and your child can come to an agreement on when videogames can be played and for how long, you can try it for a week and then revise if it’s not working. She also suggests having kids set a timer so they can monitor their own game-playing.

*** It’s never too late to establish rules.** A few weeks ago, Ms. Counts decided to do a “detox” with her son. In a written agreement, he said he’d try to whittle down game-playing to an hour a day and that the two would do more activities together, including reading books. While they haven’t reached their goal yet, she said it’s helped by giving her son something else to look forward to.

*** If a serious problem develops, seek treatment for a possible underlying condition.** Chris Ferguson, the Stetson University professor, said concerned parents should seek treatment from professionals who specialize in kids and teens.

“I would not take kids to a place that specializes in gaming addiction. A lot of them are capitalizing on this moral panic and they don’t have empirically valid treatments. They may treat the gaming addiction and give you your depressed kid back,” he said.