

PARENT UPDATE: TIPS ON BUILDING HEALTHY VIDEO GAMING HABITS

Video and online gaming has become such a norm for many adolescents that it can sometimes get out of hand before we know it, with kids staying up into the wee hours and losing sleep. General health and schoolwork can suffer in the process, and Brookline parents have expressed concern. On March 6, Coolidge Corner School and B-PEN hosted a parent presentation by expert Dr. Alok Kanojia, a psychiatrist and former gaming addict who offered information on the allure of games, how gaming can disrupt mental health and social development, and what parents can do to set – and maintain – appropriate limits.

Key takeaways:

- Gaming can be a healthy way to de-stress and engage with friends, but 8.4% of kids under age 18 are addicted to gaming. While most addictions are biological, video game overuse can be considered a behavioral addiction affecting the brain in complicated ways, including physical health, mood/personality, school performance, focus, etc. – the World Health Organization declared internet gaming disorder a disease. “If it causes a problem, it *is* a problem.”
- Telltale signs include: preoccupation/obsession with games; withdrawal when not playing; loss of interest in other activities; failure at trying to curb habit; lying about habit.
- Children are more vulnerable to gaming addiction, and the problem is getting worse. Some of the most popular games, especially those with virtual worlds (Fortnite, World of Warcraft, etc.) have more addictive potential, but adolescents don't have the maturity or experience to recognize it as a problem.
- People are drawn to games for the reward of sequential challenges, the success of completing a task, the social element of being on a team, being in a somewhat controllable environment. (Unlike school much of the time, games can give teens a sense of agency and control.) Internet gaming is a portal to a new world, a new very real community where it feels safe to connect.
- Some kids develop a virtual identity in gaming that they like and are more comfortable with than their real-world selves. Online, they can be this “other person.”
- Just as with social media, predators can take advantage of online gamers, and toxic masculinity is rampant. Keep in mind the indoctrination of some online communities, which can be an echo chamber that shapes the way we view the world.
- Kids may see professional gamers making millions of dollars, so they may glorify it as a profession. (But burn-out is high, and very few succeed.)
- The neuroscience is complicated, because we don't fully understand how the brain works, but gaming taps into the dopamine reward circuit. Games release a constant stream of

dopamine in the brain. The intensity and consistency disregulates the system and can make it hard to find enjoyment elsewhere. Gamers can develop tolerance over time (as with caffeine, for example).

- As with phones, gaming can decrease our capacity for boredom, training our brains for instant gratification, keeping the mind continuously engaged without time for reflection, deep thinking.
- Video game addiction has high comorbidity – 20% have another addiction, mostly marijuana for kids. There are also connections to anxiety, depression, which may drive adolescents to gaming addiction.

Strategies, Practical Tips:

- Try to understand **WHAT** games they are playing, which will offer insight into their experience.
- Talk about **WHY** they play video games, and try to replace some gaming energy with healthy alternatives that relate to interests -- consider sports, arts, internships, volunteering with groups like Habitat for Humanity (for constructing something concrete), MSPCA (for animal/nature lovers). Give them alternative “puzzles” – i.e., if they like math, have them help you look at refinancing house, doing taxes.
- Set reasonable expectations and rewards. (“I know you really like this, but I’m wondering if we can find other things you might like?” Or “Your grades are suffering, so we may have to cut back.” Or “If you do all your homework, you can play Fortnite for two hours.” But be flexible with time limits, rather than demanding a hard stop – consider age, personality.
- Check in weekly to see how things are going. If there’s a problem, have the conversation when they’re **not** gaming and you’re not angry.
- Adjust the environment to have more parental control. Consider moving gaming to a common area – why would gaming need to be private? Do stuff in the same room. Think about headphones vs. speakers, which allow you to know what’s being said.
- Talk to the parents of your kid’s friends. If you set limits and they don’t, it’s hard to implement.

Resources – Dr. Kanojia has created a wealth of information on his website www.healthygamer.gg

Specific recommendations include:

- A **quiz** that helps determine whether your child has a video game addiction:

<https://www.healthygamer.gg/video-game-addiction-quiz/for-parents/>

- A **lecture series** that speaks directly to gamers.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYxtGyYUCbEFAu_Z4x7sakd3CvbJHE6Kx

- A **course** for parents who are seeking an intervention. This is a 6-week step-by-step process to recovery from video game addiction that includes biweekly virtual office hours with Dr. Kanojia.

<https://regaincontrol.healthygamer.gg/>

- A closed **Facebook group** for parents

https://www.facebook.com/groups/310562406472287/?source_id=1772705079501686