



Strategies for parents around computer and video games

Computer and video games are programs that are designed for recreational use. They can be used on a variety of platforms, that is on many different types of machines, systems or devices. Many children get a lot of enjoyment out of playing video games and they can provide a healthy avenue for relieving tension and practising visual, problem-solving and fine motor skills. However, there are dangers associated with computer and video game use. For more detailed information about computer and video games, including their associated risks, see related topic *Overview of computer and video games*.

This topic aims to assist parents in helping their children develop healthy use of computer and video games. It covers:

- the impact of computer and video games
- what to look for in choosing a game
- monitoring computer and video game use
- readings & research
- related topics.

The impact of computer and video games

It is helpful to be clear in your own mind about the potential impact of computer and video games. Dr Craig Anderson, one of the leading researchers on video game violence, has produced a simple three point summary, stating:

1. learning happens
2. content matters
3. venting (the theory that players get rid of angry feelings when they play computer games) doesn't work.

Research indicates that:

- * children are more likely to learn that violence is an acceptable way to solve conflict if the violent behaviour is rewarded.
- * children need to learn that violent behaviour does have consequences.
- * the more graphic the violence, the greater the impact.
- * practising violence against other humans teaches at some level that violence against others is OK.
- * sexual violence can be dangerous learning, particularly for adolescent boys who are at the developmental stage of learning how to relate to women.

What to look for in choosing a game

Be aware that computer and video games are big business and that they are being actively marketed to your children. What might seem harmless entertainment can actually be very harm-

ful to preschoolers, yet even adults can sometimes be 'tricked' into thinking some games and programs are suitable for families by a combination of clever promotion and advertising.

The following pointers should help you in choosing good computer and video games.

Check the cover of the game

If the title and picture on the cover of the game include violence and sexual themes, you can assume these themes are also in the game. All video covers (for sale or hire) must clearly display the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) rating and consumer advice lines.

Use the OFLC classification system

In Australia, by law, all computer and video games (including those in arcades) have to be classified by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). Video covers and arcade booths must clearly display the game's classification and 'consumer advice' which indicates the chief reasons why the game got its classification (for example 'medium level violence').

Classifications are:

Classification	Meaning	Impact no higher than...	Guidelines
G	General	Very mild	For general audience
G(8+)	General	Mild	Not recommended for use by persons under 15 without guidance from parents or guardians
M15+	Mature	Moderate	Not recommended for persons under 15 years of age. No legal restrictions on access.
MA15+	Mature Restricted	Strong	Unsuitable for persons under 15 years of age. Legally restricted category.
RC	Refused Classification		Exceeds the MA(15+) classification

For more information about the classification system go to related YMA topic Classifications—computer games or contact the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) website or phone: (02) 9289 7100.

Rent and preview the game before purchasing.

Before allowing your child to purchase a computer game, rent the game and preview it with your child. Dr Craig Anderson has compiled a checklist for parents to help them avoid purchasing video games that have features, which research suggests, can cause harm. He suggests the following ways to tell if



a game is potentially harmful:

Play the game yourself, or have someone demonstrate it for you.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the game involve some characters trying to harm others?
- Does this happen frequently, that is, more than once or twice in 30 minutes?
- Is the harm rewarded in any way?
- Is the harm depicted as humorous?
- Are non-violent solutions absent or less fun than the violent ones?
- Are realistic consequences of violence absent from the game?

If the answers to two or more questions is 'yes', think very carefully about the lessons being taught before allowing access to those games.

Look for games which provide constructive learning

Once you have eliminated games that have violent or sexual themes, look for games that provide constructive learning experiences, games that:

- are more complex than punching, running, jumping or shooting
- encourage group activity
- require the player to come up with strategies, solve problems and make decisions.

Monitoring computer and video game use

Even though you have taken care in choosing appropriate computer and video games for your child, there are a number of ways that you can continue to exert a positive influence.

Make sensible rules about playing computer games

Parents can make a big difference in reducing the risks for their children by making sensible rules. Be clear with them about what is acceptable content and what you will not allow them to play. It is helpful for the child if they have the opportunity to discuss with you your reasons.

Depending on the age of the child, you may choose to negotiate with them:

- how much time can be spent playing computer games, setting a daily or weekly limit
- times at which they are not allowed to play, for example during meal times or after a certain time at night

- what other activities need to be completed before playing computer games, for example, homework, sport or music practice, household chores.

Keep the computer in a public place

In this way you can more easily monitor how much time your child is spending playing games and the content of the games they are playing.

Monitor what your children are playing

As much as possible, keep track of the games your children are playing. Find out where they get games from: in addition to buying or hiring them they could be getting them from friends, off the internet or from contacts they have made on the internet.

Exposure to violent and sexually explicit computer games and images has been linked to emotional and health problems in children. As with purchasing games, it is a good idea to check games that your child has got from other sources yourself, particularly if the game has themes of violence and / or sex.

Discuss what they are playing elsewhere

It is likely that your child will be exposed to many games that you would not allow in your own home, either at friends' homes or in arcades. Use the opportunity to explain to your child the potentially harmful effect of playing such games. Discuss with them the different rules different households may have and be clear about your expectations of their behaviour whether at home or elsewhere.

Keep communication open

Listen to what your child has to say about the computer and video games they are playing. Explain the reasons for your viewpoint, encourage them to question the marketing surrounding the computer game industry and to start making informed decisions for themselves.

Keep an eye on your child's overall health and wellbeing

Take note of your child's reactions after they have been playing computer games. Do they become aggressive, frightened or withdrawn?

Watch out for signs that your child is becoming addicted to playing computer games. Changes in eating habits, moods, school performance, interaction with friends and involvement in non-computer activities might indicate that a problem is developing.



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