Rockin' around the Wii: Video games fun but pose social, health risks

December 7 2006

Move over Tickle Me Elmo. The recently released Nintendo Wii and Playstation 3 video game systems are rivaling the giggling red monster as the gifts children beg their parents for most this holiday season.

As coveted as these new video game systems and other models are, some parents may want to think twice before buying them for their children and teens, a University of Florida child psychologist says.

With more educational games hitting store shelves and one system, the Nintendo Wii, actually requiring players to peel themselves off the couch to use it, video game makers seem to be addressing concerns about how playing affects children. But too much gaming still puts children more at-risk for behavioral and health problems, which is why parents should consider how they will control children's playing before they buy a system, said Eric Storch, a UF assistant professor of pediatrics and psychiatry.

"If you're concerned it is going to be difficult to control how much your child is playing, then one recommendation would be not to tempt them," Storch said. "Don't purchase one of these systems."

Video games can be a good outlet for children who like them, but they shouldn't consume their lives, Storch added. Setting limits on playing time may help prevent casual gaming from spiraling into hours spent in front of a television screen with a controller.

Children and teens who play excessively often do so at the expense of homework, and playing solo can isolate children from their peers, potentially causing problems for them later in life, Storch said.

"Social interactions teach you how to deal with other people as well as what's appropriate and what's not," he said. "You learn how to handle situations. Social interaction is also one way of coping with stress and receiving emotional support."

Serious gamers who spend hours sitting in front of a TV also risk becoming obese and developing associated health problems, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, Storch said. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to limit children's total TV, video game and computer time to two hours each day.

Unlike typical gaming systems, the new Nintendo Wii uses a wandlike controller that requires players to physically perform the action they want to see on-screen. The system gets users off the couch, but it's still not like playing soccer or jogging, Storch said.

On the other hand, research has shown that Dance Dance Revolution, a game that requires players to dance on a mat to mimic moves they see on their TV, elicits the same level of motion in children as other forms of exercise. But the game is a solo activity, Storch said. Dancing with friends or playing sports would get kids moving and give them a chance to spend time with peers, he said.

Although gamers lose time to participate in sports and other physical activities, video games aren't the sole reason many aren't more active, said Elizabeth Vandewater, an assistant professor of human development and family sciences and director of the Center for Research on Interactive Technology, Television and Children at the University of Texas. If the video games weren't there, many children would simply

find something else to do inside, in part because crime and traffic increasingly hamper their ability to play outside, she said.

"Children in America are definitely less active," Vandewater said. "The question is whether (TV, computers and video games) are to blame."

Most parents know to watch out for violent and graphic video games, but even educational games may not be as beneficial as they seem in commercials. Many games that claim to be educational aren't evaluated to find out if children are actually learning from them, Vandewater said.

"Parents need to know they are being marketed to," she said.

Each family is different, so deciding whether to game is best left up to parents, Storch said. The key: Parents who do allow video games should establish limits and rules and stick with them. Those concerned about their children abiding by the limits can remove controllers or install a new swipe-card system that only allows them to play for a programmed amount of time, automatically shutting off the system when it lapses. Another good strategy — have children do homework and play outside first, Storch said.

"There are certainly some positives to (video game playing)," Storch said. "For many kids it's really enjoyable. But moderation is the key."

Source: University of Florida