Video games are good for girls -- if parents play along

February 1 2011

Dads who still haven't given up video games now have some justification to keep on playing – if they have a daughter.

Researchers from Brigham Young University's School of Family Life conducted a study on video games and children between 11 and 16 years old. They found that girls who played video games with a parent enjoyed a number of advantages. Those girls behaved better, felt more connected to their families and had stronger mental health. Professor Sarah Coyne is the lead author of the study, which appears Feb. 1 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"The surprising part about this for me is that girls don't play video games as much as boys," Coyne said. "But they did spend about the same amount of time co-playing with a parent as boys did."

The findings come with one important caveat: The games had to be age-appropriate. If the game was rated M for mature, it weakened the statistical relationship between co-playing and family connectedness.

The study involved 287 families with an adolescent child. Mario Kart, Mario Brothers, Wii Sports, Rock Band and Guitar Hero topped the list of games played most often by girls. Call of Duty, Wii Sports and Halo ranked 1, 2 and 3 among boys.

For boys, playing with a parent was not a statistically significant factor for any of the outcomes the researchers measured (positive behavior,

aggression, family connection, mental health). Yet for girls, playing with a parent accounted for as much as 20 percent of the variation on those measured outcomes.

Coyne and her co-author Laura Padilla-Walker offer two possible explanations for what's behind the gender differences.

"We're guessing it's a daddy-daughter thing, because not a lot of moms said yes when we asked them if they played video games," Padilla-Walker said. "Co-playing is probably an indicator of larger levels of involvement."

It's also possible that the time boys play with parents doesn't stand out as much because they spend far more time playing with friends. The researchers plan to explore the basis of these gender differences in more detail as they continue working on this project.

Padilla-Walker remembers the outcry from gamers two years ago when this study linked frequent video game playing to poor relationships with friends and family. Though she has a Ph.D. and expertise in analyzing statistical pathways, her most effective response to those critics is rooted in common sense.

"If you spend huge amounts of time absorbed in any activity, it's going to affect your relationships," Padilla-Walker said.

And that brings us to some practical parenting advice illustrated by the new study on playing video games with kids.

"Any face-to-face time you have with your child can be a positive thing, especially if the activity is something the child is interested in," Padilla-Walker said.

Provided by Brigham Young University