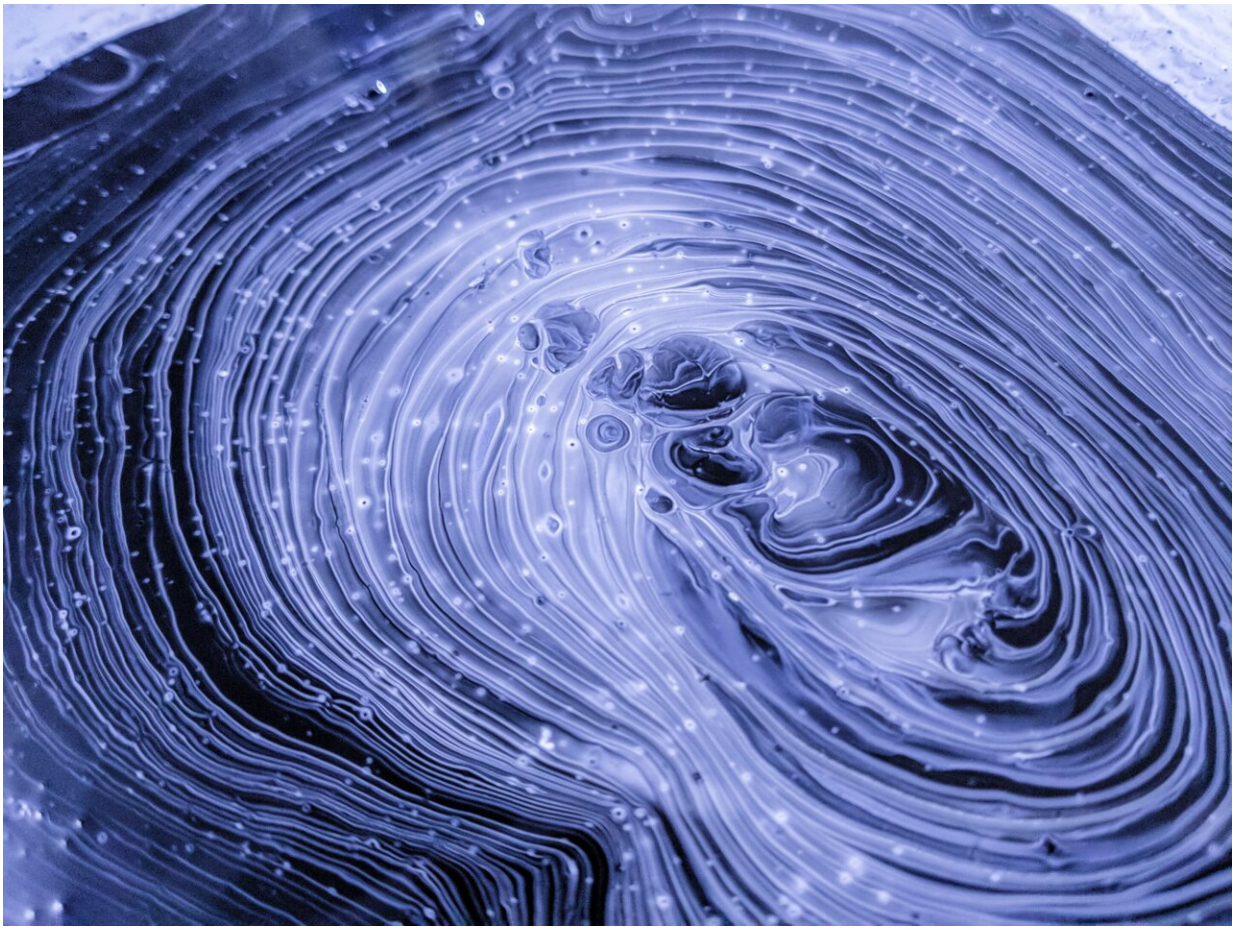
Electronic games—how much is too much for kids?

July 7 2017, by Sue Walker And Susan Danby



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Most parents view their children's playing of electronic games as

potentially problematic – or even dangerous. Yet many children are engaging with electronic games more frequently than ever.

Concerns about electronic gaming do not stack up against the research. So, how much gaming is too much for young children?

Electronic games (also called computer or digital games) are found in 90% of households in Australia. 65% of households have three or more game devices. Given this prevalence, it's timely to look more closely at electronic game playing and what it really means for children's development and learning.

A study of more than 3,000 children participating in the Growing Up in Australia: Longitudinal Study of Australian Children explored children's electronic gaming. This national sample was broadly representative of the Australian population.

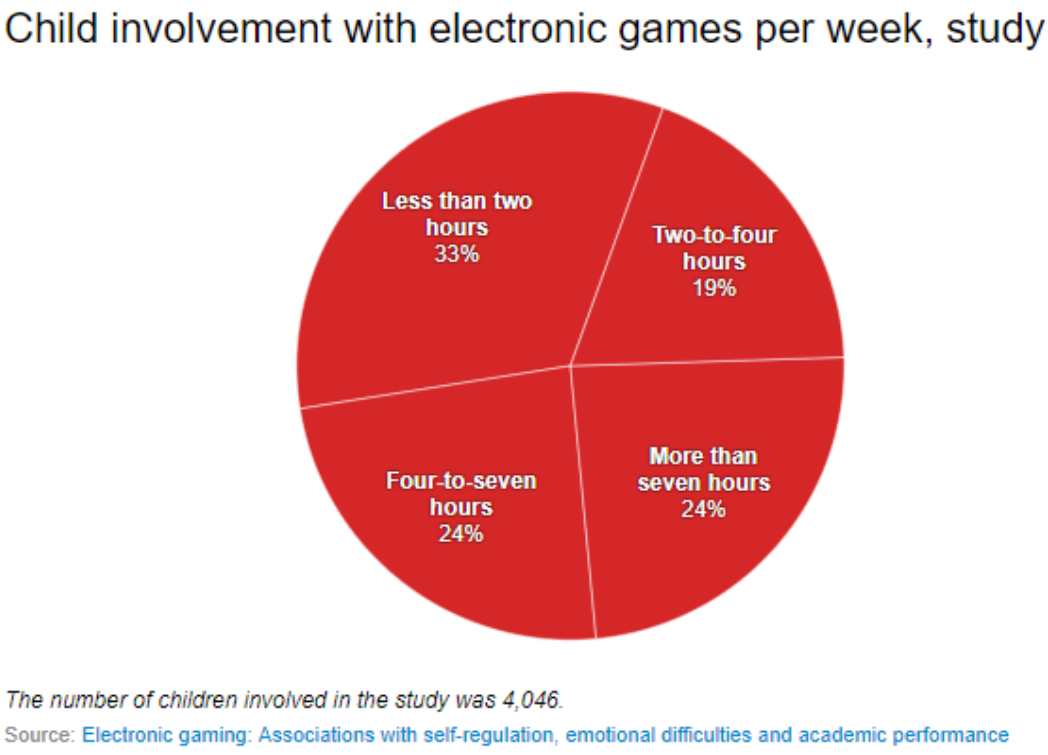
The study had two phases:

parents reported on their children's use of electronic games when their children were eight or nine years of age; and

teachers reported two years later on these children's social and emotional development and academic achievement, when the children were 10 or 11.

How much time do kids spend gaming?

As the table below shows, there was wide variation in the number of hours per week the children spent playing electronic games.



Most children (52%) played electronic games for four or fewer hours per week. But nearly one-year of the children (24%) were reported as playing electronic games for more than seven hours per week.

How much time should kids spend gaming?

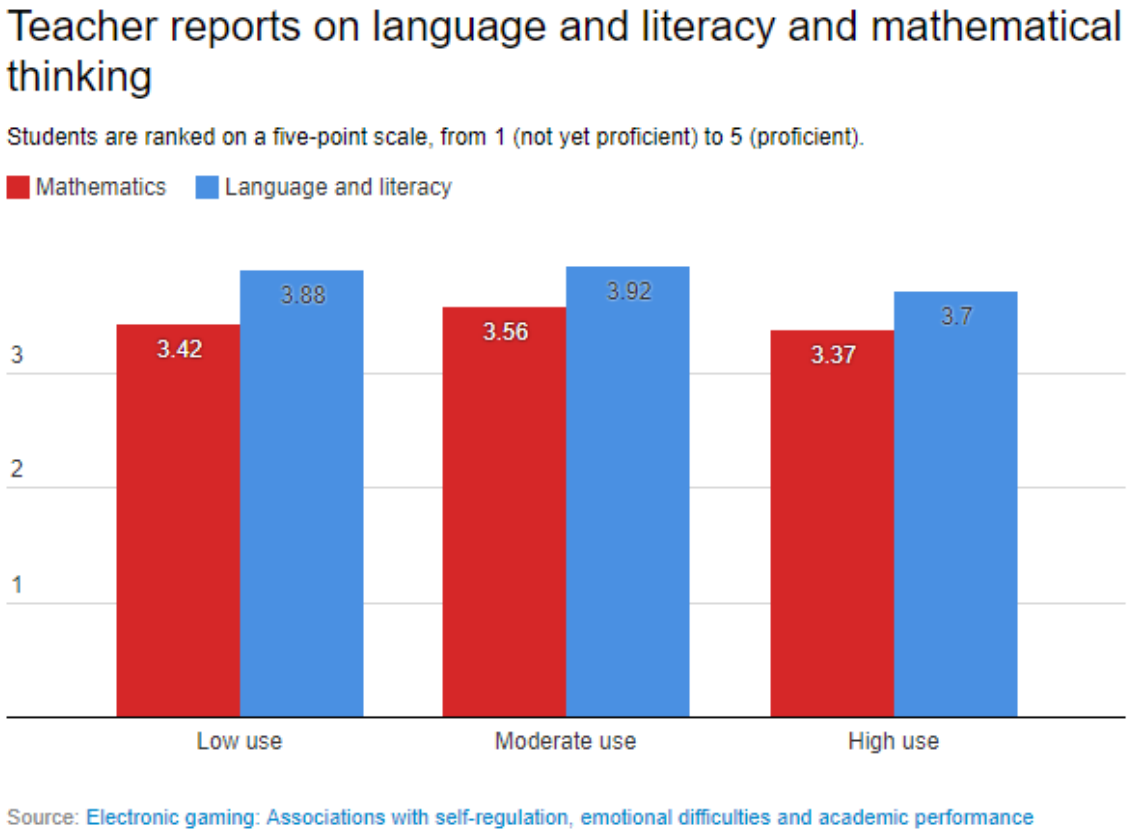
Taking into account family background and parental education, the good news is that low-to-moderate use of electronic games (between two and four hours per week) had a positive effect on children's later academic achievement.

However, over-use of electronic games (more than seven hours per

week) had a negative effect on children's social and emotional development.

Children whose parents reported they played electronic games for two-to-four hours per week were identified by their teachers as showing better literacy and mathematical skills.

Surprisingly, children who were reported as playing electronic games infrequently or not at all (less than two hours per week) did not appear to benefit in terms of literacy or mathematics achievement.



Source: Electronic gaming: Associations with self-regulation, emotional difficulties and academic performance

However, children whose parents reported that they played electronic games for more than one hour per day were identified two years later by their teachers as having poor attention span, less ability to stay on task, and displaying more emotional difficulties.

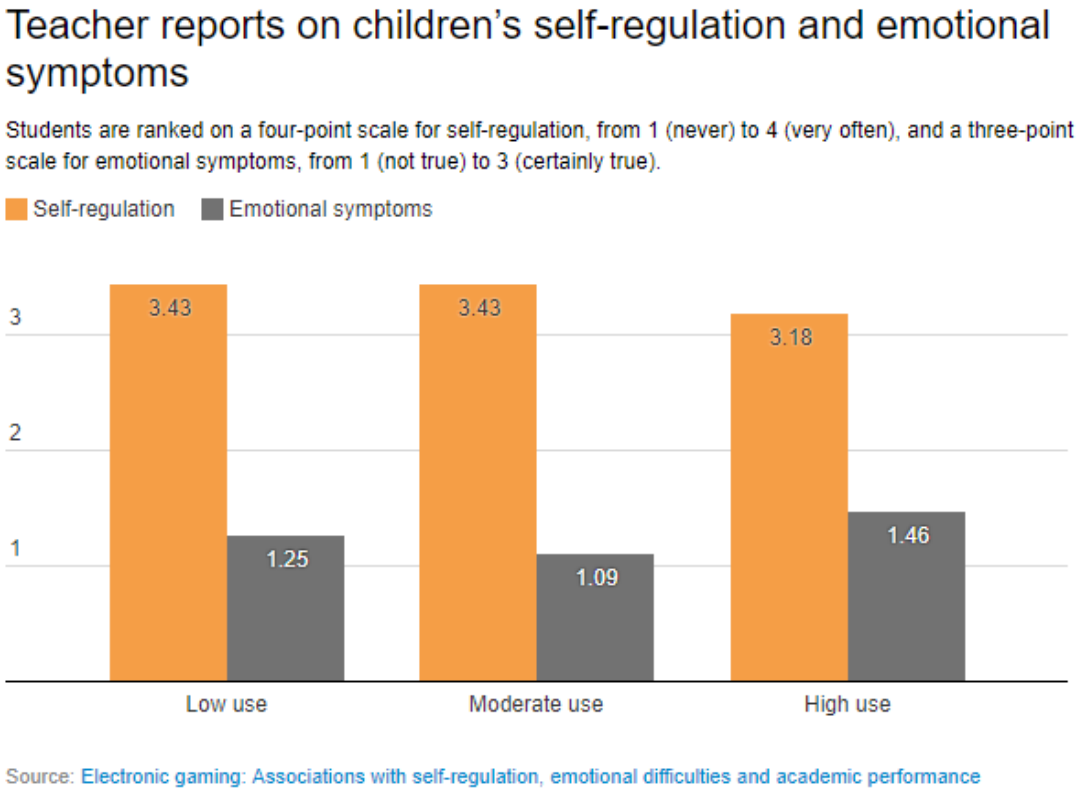
As the graphs below show, moderate game playing was associated with the most benefits both academically and emotionally.

Are some games better than others?

It is likely that the relationship between the use of electronic games and children's academic and developmental outcomes is far from straightforward. The quality of electronic games and the family context play important roles.

Electronic games known as sandbox games are recognised as offering opportunities for collaboration with others while engaging in creative and problem solving activities. One of the well-known examples of a sandbox game is Minecraft.

Social interactions are important in supporting children's engagement in electronic games. A closer examination of children's experiences at home may be beneficial in understanding the context of gaming in everyday life.



Often viewed as a leisure activity, studies show that when parents and siblings participate in the game playing, they offer opportunities to negotiate with each other, and engage in conversations and literacy practices. All of these potentially contribute to the child's language, literacy and social development.

It is important to note that while we know the amount of time children spent playing electronic games, we do not know the detail of the kinds of games that were being played, with whom they were being played, or even the device on which they were played.

This contextual information is clearly relevant for consideration in any further research that explores the relationship across children's electronic game playing, learning, and wellbeing.

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