Should parents buy video games for their children at Christmas?

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Playing video games is arguably the most popular leisure activity in the U.K. This Christmas, the sales of video game hardware and software are likely to be astronomical. But with all the media hype surrounding the

more negative aspects of video game playing, should parents be worried about buying these games for their kids? Distinguished Professor Mark Griffiths, addiction expert and researcher explains.

Griffiths: Back in December 1993, I gave a paper on adolescent video game addiction at the British Psychological Society Conference that received more publicity than I have ever received for any other piece of research I have ever carried out. It received blanket coverage in all the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers as well as endless radio and television coverage including all the major national news bulletins.

In January 1994, I received a letter from a leading video game company complaining that publication of my mid-December report may have affected their Christmas sales of video games. The validity of my research was also called into question.

Since 1993, I have arguably published more research papers on video game addiction than any other academic in the world. However, just because my research has consistently identified a small number of individuals who appear to be addicted to video games does not mean that I am in any way "anti-video games."

I have three children and they are all archetypal "screenagers" who spend a lot of time playing video games. I certainly have the view that the positives of playing video games far outweigh the negatives. I've written many articles pointing out the benefits of video game playing including educational benefits, health benefits, therapeutic benefits, and psychomotor benefits (e.g., hand–eye coordination and increased reaction times).

So when it comes to video games, what should parents do? To begin with parents should find out what video games their children are actually playing! All video games now feature the PEGI rating system (Pan

European Game Information), which not only contains a specific age rating but also specific game content (such as whether the video game features sex, violence, fear, swearing, gambling, discrimination, etc.). Parents may find that some video games contain material that they would prefer their children not being exposed to.

If parents have objections to the content of the games they should facilitate discussion with their kids about this, and if appropriate, have a few rules. For instance, parents should: (i) help choose suitable games that are still fun for their children to play, (ii) talk about the content of the games so that children understand the difference between make-believe and reality, (iii) discourage solitary game playing for long periods, (iv) follow recommendations on the possible risks outlined by video game manufacturers, and (v) ensure that children have plenty of other activities to pursue in their free time besides the playing of video games.

It needs to be remembered that video game playing is just one of many activities that a child can do alongside sporting activities, school clubs, reading, watching television, and socializing with their friends. These can all contribute to a balanced recreational diet. But when does it become a problem? The most asked question a parent wants answering is "How much video game playing is too much?" To help answer this question, I devised a simple checklist. It is designed to check if a child's video game playing is getting out of hand. Ask yourself these simple questions. Does your child:

- Play video games almost every day?
- Often play video games for long periods (over three to four hours at a time)?
- Play video games for excitement or "buzz"?
- Get restless, irritable, and moody if they can't play video games?
- Sacrifice social and sporting activities to play video games?

- Play video games instead of doing their homework?
- Try to cut down their video game playing but can't?

If the answer is "yes" to more than four of these questions, then your child may be playing too much and you need to foster other activities to replace the video game playing. Thankfully, very few children are genuinely addicted to video games, but as responsible parents it is our job to monitor their video game playing and there are now plenty of games that we can play along too. I'm sure many of them will be in this year's Christmas stockings.

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