

Guns 'n games

If video games sometimes have a bad effect on children, it is boys who are worse off. By Antoniella Gatt, from the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality.

Video games can be beneficial for children. They stimulate imagination and intellectual development. They can also increase our children's interest in technology. They do, however, have a dark side – and it seems that boys bear the brunt of it.

Video games really took off in the 1980s. But the difference between the quality of the games then and now is remarkable. There are also plenty of peripherals such as guns and gaming chairs to provide an enhanced gaming experience.

The high quality of modern video games makes it no wonder that, according to a recent study, boys play video games for an average of 13 hours a week. Girls, on the other hand, play for about five or six.

The differences don't end there. Video games advertised for girls are mostly based on life simulation and are associated with traditional stereotypical roles such as babysitting or cooking. Such games are considered girly for the majority of boys, because the video games advertised for them are based on action and adventure, where violence is prevalent.

There are numerous studies that show video games affect children, so the effects of these games on boys is of major concern.

A lot of 'boys' games' allow the gamer to become an active participant in the script and move up the levels by engaging in repeated acts of violence. This means violent video games may increase aggressive behaviour because the violent acts are continually repeated throughout the levels.

There is another way these games' can affect boys' perception of the world. Female characters are mainly portrayed as the ones who need to be saved. They also tend to be over sexualised. These portrayals of the role of women reinforce the stereotypical images that women are purely sexual objects who cannot be independent or strong.

Such stereotypes distort children's views about how men and women should behave and could have an influence on their decisions in later life. While some game developers are starting to give important roles to female characters, the progress is still slow.

Male culture dominates the video gaming industry, according to Nina Huntemann, an associate professor at the Department of Communication and Journalism at Suffolk University. The games send messages about what it means to be a man. And the overwhelming lesson on masculinity, says Prof. Huntemann, is that violence is the preferred means for accomplishing goals, resolving conflict and even for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships with women.

Professor Tanya Byron, a consultant in child and adolescent mental health, says that young children learn by copying – and copying certain actions in video games is not acceptable in real life. It is therefore parents' duty to make sure children are playing games that are suitable for their age.

Children also need to be taught that, unlike the scenarios played out in so many video games, everyone deserves respect irrespective of their gender, and that conflict is resolved by communication and not through violent behaviour.

Safe gaming tips

- ✓ Give your child safe games and websites to use
- ✓ Avoid war and fighting games
- ✓ Make sure your computer is in a place you can see, not the bedroom
- ✓ Ensure that the games are good and fun
- ✓ Set up the computer so they cannot load games or go on websites without your permission
- ✓ Make sure the age rating of the game is okay
- ✓ Always get your child to ask before using the computer
- ✓ Regularly check what your child is doing
- ✓ Try not to let them play for too long

Source: Safer Children in a Digital World (2008, DCSF & DCMS)

Take the ratings seriously

The PEGI (Pan European Game Information), UK, and the ERSB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board) in the US, are two video game regulators which rate every video game in the market.

PEGI rates video games as 3, 7, 12, 16, and 18 while ERSB rates them as EC, E, E10+, T, M and AO.

Games rated 3 and EC are suitable for all age groups. Violence here may be present in a comical context (the type of violence we find in Tom and Jerry or Scooby-Doo) but as the rating goes up, the violence gets worse. In games rated 16 or M, and 18 or AO, intense violence, blood and sexual content are expected.

Therefore, if a game says 18 on the box it does not mean that it is difficult to play, but that the content is designed for an adult audience.