FACTSHEET on Boys (5-11) and Screens
(television, games consoles, telephone and internet)

Whether we like it or not, television, computer games and screens have become central to most children's lives. Some children can play a computer game before they can tie their shoelaces and some will confidently press the keyboard before they can read.

This factsheet aims to help parents think about what benefits and what risks there might be for their children. We have concentrated on the questions that parents most often ask.

How much time in front of the screens?

Children aged six to eleven are thought to watch an average of 28 hours of television, videos and computer games a week (four hours a day), with two to five year olds watching an average of 32 hours [1]. Another survey found that four hours a day was a minimum for six- to fourteen-year-olds, but that this often doubled during the weekends and school holidays [2].

The average household has three televisions and almost a third (29%) of two- and three-year-old children have a set in their bedrooms [3]. A quarter of five-year-olds have the internet in their room and one in three eight-year-olds has a mobile phone [4]. More than a third of seven- to ten-year-olds log into Facebook at least once a week, and for eleven- and twelve-year-olds this rises to 71% [5].

Many eight- to twelve-year-olds watch post-watershed programmes and more than half of children (54%) watch TV without their parents' knowledge, mainly because more than three-quarters of children have a TV in their rooms. Sixty-eight per cent of children say they are allowed to watch anything they want to on TV [6].

Television is thought by many to have become a free babysitter service, with the majority of parents not limiting time on video games and television [7].

Reducing the time spent watching TV and playing video games to under seven hours a week is thought to decrease verbal aggression by 50% and physical aggression by 40% among seven- and eight-year-olds [8].

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time a day and to keep children's bedrooms 'media free' so that parents can monitor television, computer and games use [9]. A University of Bristol study of 1,000 children (aged ten) recommends a limit of two hours a day to avoid mental health problems [10] and the British Medical Council recommends a limit of one hour a day [11].

Does age make a difference?

Age is thought to be very important in how screens **affect** children and young people. So much so that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two do not watch screens at all [16]. Under-fives don't see the difference between reality and fantasy (for example, the difference between a video game and the news). There are also thought to be more harmful effects on under-elevens than older children.

Boys and girls

Boys play video games twice as much as girls (thirteen hours a week compared to five) [12]. From age six to thirteen, computer games are popular for both boys and girls, but after thirteen girls move on to more 'serious' use for the computer, while boys continue with computer games [13]. Twice as many boys as girls play computer games every day and 40% of boys and 51% of girls played casually, with only 2.2% saying they never play. Boys generally play more often and for longer than girls preferring action and fighting games, while girls' preferred platform or puzzle games. Boys who said they played daily often played alone. Interestingly, most children when asked about their favourite activity did not say computer games [14].

Why do they play?

Children played on the computer when they were bored; didn't want to do their homework; when nobody else was there; or when friends were there and when the weather was bad and they couldn't go out [15].

Do violent games lead to aggression?

Nine out of ten top-selling video games contain violence and half of all games contain serious violence [17]. The more boys play games the more likely it is that boys will be aggressive; have confrontations with teachers; get into fights and underachieve [18]. Those who are already aggressive are usually drawn to violent video games. Boys in particular are thought to learn and practice aggressive solutions to conflict as a result of violent computer games [19].

Violent games are thought to make children less caring and helpful (this is the case for non-aggressive children as well as those who are aggressive) [20]. Among four- to eight-year-olds, playing an aggressive video game led to aggressive behaviour, while college students are not aggressive after playing violent video games [21].

By the time the typical American boy gets to eleven, he will have witnessed 8,000 murders on television [22].

What positives are there for children from television and games?

There are many benefits to the use of computers, games consoles and TV for children. The internet provides huge amounts of information. Screens are thought to help children develop the ability to visualise (important for learning), while the internet provides a great platform for talking to other people. Games are thought to develop dexterity and motor skills [23] [24].

What negatives are there for children from television and games?

Too much use

Eight-and-a-half per cent of Americans aged eight to eighteen are thought to be addicted to computer games [25]. For some parents the major problem is what children are NOT doing while watching screens. They are not exploring the physical world while immersed in fantasy play. They are communicating less and not being creative which is thought to impact on children's physical, social and mental development.

Impact on their education

Television and computer games give rewards, which release dopamine. If children get used to this release as well as the very quick pace of the TV and games then they find the real world under-stimulating. Most school-based tasks do not release dopamine and therefore these are harder for many young children to engage with [26]. This also impacts on boys' motivation; if they are used to regular rewards (points) then they often come into school looking for what they will 'get' for working and that is not always so obvious.

The more infants and toddlers watch television the more likely they are to have language delay, fewer words and be inactive, obese, while suffering difficulties with sleeping and control of their aggression [27].

When there is background TV, children under three play less. With babies aged 8-16 months, the more they watch TV the fewer words they know [28].

Aggression and their view of others

The younger boys are, the more likely they are to be aggressive as a result of watching violent video games. They are also more likely to develop a view of the world as 'mean' which will affect the way they view other people.

What can parents do to reduce the risks?

There are six areas we would suggest to parents. They are:

Reduce use – decide on a daily or weekly amount and stick with it. The younger your children are the more impact screens are likely to have. Television and console use in moderation will not harm your child's development.

Encourage them to do other things – encourage and help organise other activities that will stimulate and help their development. Sport and exercise are good examples, as well as other organised activities such as reading and board games.

Age appropriate – follow the guidance on computer games. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESBRB) rate games as follows:

EC (early childhood) – suitable for children three years and older; E (everyone) – six years and older, containing minimal violence and some 'comic mischief'; T (teen) – suitable for persons thirteen and older (more violent than E rating and contains mild or strong language and 'suggestive' themes); M (mature) – seventeen years and older, with more mature sexual themes, intense violence and stronger language; AO (adults only) – for those over the age of eighteen.

Help him manage – If he finds it difficult to control his game playing, you need to help him to set limits on how much time he can play and encourage him to be involved in other activities. Boys have to learn to manage, so 'NO' on its own doesn't help. Make this an area for negotiation and look for signs whether he is managing the amount of time he is looking at screens. If he doesn't learn to manage, it will probably mean that he will go to friends' houses where there are no limits.

Screens where you can monitor – one of the toughest decisions is whether screens are permissible in bedrooms. Issues about supervision; watching and not sleeping; disturbed sleep and waking with the TV are all important if you are going to help him manage and reduce the negative impact that screens might have on his life.

What is best for him – remember, this is about his development, not what is convenient for you, or even whether you are for or against. If his use of screens has allowed you to get on with what you need to do, but has negatively impacted on him, address this now, it won't get any easier when he is older.

Boys' Development Project

This FACTSHEET was written by Trefor Lloyd of the Boys Development Project. There are regular workshops for parents to discuss the impact on their sons.
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