Fortnite, Boys, and Self-Control

What can research tell us about the latest videogame craze?

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If you talk to American teens often, as I do, then you know that the video game *Fortnite*is sweeping the United States. *Fortnite* recently had more than 2.4 billion views in a single month on YouTube, [surpassing *Minecraft* for the #1 position](https://www.pcgamer.com/fortnite-passes-minecraft-to-become-the-biggest-game-on-youtube/) among video games. According to Ron Wyatt, YouTube’s director of gaming, [*Fortnite* now holds the record for the most game-related videos uploaded in a single month](https://www.rollingstone.com/glixel/news/fortnite-is-now-the-most-viewed-game-on-youtube-w518612).

The reaction to the *Fortnite* epidemic from mainstream pundits has been disappointing. Lisa Damour, a regular contributor to the *New York Times*, [advised parents to chill](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/well/family/parenting-the-fortnite-addict.html): after all, Damour wrote, videogames "cultivate the spatial skills needed in advanced math and engineering." Damour and other pundits have shown little awareness of studies showing that playing video games excessively [undermines school performance](https://public.psych.iastate.edu/caa/abstracts/2010-2014/12pmag.pdf), [increases distractibility](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5a5e/bbcafac11e67f40e9d63dac5175f6243bb8c.pdf), and [erodes the parent-child relationship](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103022.pdf). And, playing video games where the objective is to kill people - games such as *Fortnite* - over time, [desensitizes gamers to violence](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Jd31BQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA65&ots=cjCEXuaObU&sig=SiIrsoLJ_uLjByB_Nf1jr76-R1o#v=onepage&q&f=false). The American Academy of Pediatrics [has concluded](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/07/14/peds.2016-1298) that games “in which killing others is the central theme” – a good summary of Fortnite – “are not appropriate for children.” Incidentally, “children” here means “humans under 18 years of age.” In their latest guidelines, [the Academy advised](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/07/14/peds.2016-1298) that “Video games should not use human or other living targets or award points for killing” and that parents should not allow their kids to play games which violate this guideline. In case you haven’t seen it, *Fortnite* is a game in which the object of the game is to kill other humans.

If you are the parent of a child or teen, and your kid wants to join the lemmings, what should you do?

You must have the courage to say: *This is not a good thing*. Kids need to learn face-to-face social skills. They need to be physically active, preferably outdoors. They need to get a good night’s [sleep](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sleep). A kid obsessed with *Fortnite*is less likely to be doing any of these things.

I’m not suggesting that you ban video games. But it’s the parent’s job to set reasonable limits. In updating my book *Boys Adrift: the five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men*, I reviewed dozens of studies of video games: who’s playing them, what are the effects, and what are sensible limits. I also spoke with some of the investigators doing the research. Here are evidence-based guidelines for your son or daughter playing video games:

* No more than 40 minutes a night on school nights.
* No more than an hour a day on weekends.
* Your minutes do not roll over: if you go three weeks without playing, that does NOT mean that you are allowed to spend seven hours on a Saturday playing video games. That’s binge gaming, and it is harmful.
* No games where the objective is to kill people. That means no *Fortnite*, no *Call of Duty*, no *Grand Theft Auto*. *NBA Live*is fine. *Wii Bowling* is fine. *Madden NFL Football*is fine. *Candy Crush*is fine.
* No games until all the homework is done and all the chores are done.

The real challenge for parents comes in enforcing these guidelines. Some parents won’t even try. Parents say to me, “[I just want him to be happy](https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/05/i-just-want-her-to-be-happy). Playing *Fortnite* makes him happy. So why shouldn’t I let him play?”

But “I just want him to be happy” is a low bar. You can do better. Your son can do better. No child is born wanting to be a great scientist, or composer, or teacher, or entrepreneur. They have to learn something of the scope of human possibility beyond what they see in a cartoon video game like *Fortnite.* In other words: it is your job, as the parent, to educate desire: to instill a longing for something better, more lasting, than video games or [Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner on Instagram](https://www.statista.com/statistics/421169/most-followers-instagram/).

What characteristic, measured in [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/child-development), best predicts [health](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/health), wealth, and [happiness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/happiness) in that individual 20 years down the road, when the child is an adult? Is it [intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/intelligence)? Grades in school? Ability to make friends? No. It is none of these things. Longitudinal cohort studies consistently find that [*self-control* in childhood best predicts health, wealth, and happiness in adulthood, far better than IQ scores, grades in school, friendliness or popularity](https://www.americanscientist.org/article/lifelong-impact-of-early-self-control).

It follows that a top priority for a [wise](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/wisdom) parent must be to teach [self-control](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/self-control). Your child will not learn self-control by playing *Fortnite* for hours at a stretch. So how do you teach self-control? One good first step might be to say, “No dessert until you eat your broccoli. No video games until all the chores are done and all the homework is done.” In the United States today, [it has become unfashionable to say these things](http://www.leonardsax.com/books/the-collapse-of-parenting/): and that may be one factor driving the rapid rise in the rates of [anxiety](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/magazine/why-are-more-american-teenagers-than-ever-suffering-from-severe-anxiety.html) and [depression](http://time.com/4572593/increase-depression-teens-teenage-mental-health/) among American teens. Adolescents need structure and guidance. When parents become more permissive, rates of anxiety, [depression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/depression) and disengagement among teens are likely to rise, as they have done.

Do your job. Turn off the screen. Take your kid for a hike outdoors, or go sailing, or visit a museum. Don’t worry about your kid’s popularity with other kids: being popular, for young teens, is now [a major risk factor for bad outcomes](https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/23/cool-at-13-adrift-at-23/). And if your kid absolutely insists that only simulated combat will satisfy him, then take him out for an afternoon of paintball. Prioritize the real world above the world of video games.

If you don’t, who will?