

Video Gaming and Youth

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Research indicates video gaming is associated with a variety of both beneficial and harmful effects on children and adolescents. These effects vary based on the risk profile of the individual player as well as exposure to certain features and elements of video games.

Tweens and teens spend an average of 1.5-2.0 hours a day playing video games.

(Rideout et al., 2022)

EFFECTS ON YOUTH FROM VIDEO GAMING

Beneficial Effects from Gaming



Connection/Social

- Majority of tween/teen players (70%) say they play to connect with others
- Games are a venue where boys particularly make and connect with friends
- Cooperative games can support prosocial and helping behaviors

Cognitive

- Some research indicates youth gaming is associated with cognitive skill improvement in:
 - » Executive function, including inhibitory control (self-regulation of reactions/behavior to achieve goals)
 - » Attention
 - » Working memory
 - » Problem-solving
 - » Cognitive spatial skills
 - » Neural processing and efficiency

Note: Other research indicates these improvements are only in game play and do not translate to overall cognitive improvement.



Effects from High Amounts of Gaming



Gaming at least several hours a day is associated with an increased likelihood of:

- » Depression (particularly in boys)
- » Anxiety (particularly in girls)
- » OCD thoughts and behaviors
- » Behavioral problems
- » Self-harm (particularly in boys)
- » Suicidal ideation

Problematic gaming* is associated with:

- » Addictive behaviors
- » Attention problems
- » Exacerbation of existing mental health issues
- » Sleep problems
- » Poor posture/lower neck bone density

*Gaming patterns that interfere with daily life functioning (learn more on page 2)

(Granic et al., 2014; Lager & Corso, 2025; Lenhart et al., 2015; Miedzobrodzka et al., 2022; Park et al., 2025; Pehlivanurk et al., 2024; Peng et al., 2025; Rideout & Robb, 2021; Sala et al., 2018; Smirni, et al., 2021)

Aggression and Violent Video Gaming – Risk Profiles



Research is mixed on the relationship between aggressive behavior and violent video game play. Some research indicates that youth in certain “risk profiles” are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior after violent video game play.

- **High risk:** Male, high levels of relational aggression before gaming, high conflict family environment, low reactivity to stressful stimuli, high levels of violent video gaming
- **Low risk:** Female, high socioeconomic status, low hostility and low stress family environment, low amounts of video game play, low amounts of violent video game play

(Coyne, et al., 2023)



Video Game Features Encourage Youth Overengagement and Spending



Features that encourage overengagement:

- **Free-to-play (F2P):** Games with no upfront cost that often use engagement maximization and in-app purchases to generate profit
- **Season passes:** Modern game subscriptions that roll out content slowly, encouraging players to keep playing so their initial purchase doesn't feel "wasted"



Features that encourage overspending:

- **Loot boxes:** Randomized reward packs purchased with real or virtual currency, introducing gambling-like mechanics to game play
- **Microtransactions:** Small, easily repeatable in-game purchases incentivize impulse buying and normalize constant spending during play, obscuring total amount spent
- **Pay-to-win (P2W):** Game design in which paid items give players a direct advantage, which creates social and competitive pressure to continuously spend real money

The High-Risk Zone In-Game Chat and Lobbies



Today's online multiplayer games often feature in-game voice chat and "lobbies" (waiting spaces in games where mixed-age players can talk to each other via voice or text). These features are often "on by default" even when players are registered as youth.

Many youth are exposed to toxic behavior in these spaces as a routine part of online play, though there is wide variation in beliefs about what constitutes toxic behavior.

Anonymous and unmoderated chat with mixed-age players in these spaces are associated with exposure to:

- Cyberbullying
- Harassment
- Sexual harassment
- Slurs/hate speech
- "Severe" abuse, including stalking, doxxing, and violent threats
- Toxic behavior with more negative impacts for girls' mental well-being and self-esteem

(Antidefamation League, 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Hygen et al., 2025; Kowert & Woodwell, 2022; Kwak et al., 2015)

When Does a Video Gaming Habit Become Problematic?



Gaming disorder is defined as a persistent pattern of gaming (online or offline) lasting at least 12 months that leads to significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, or occupational functioning.

Red flags include:

- Gaming replacing sleep, school, or social life
- Difficulty reducing gaming time
- Irritability when not gaming
- Continued play despite problems

Risk factors: Family conflict, low socioeconomic status, depression in parents, intrusive parenting, loneliness, social anxiety, purchase of loot boxes in game

Protective influences: Parental awareness of video gaming time spent and activities, positive parenting, having positive self-worth tied to other aspects of life

(Darvesh et al., 2020; Ide et al., 2021; Mun & Lee, 2021; Petrescu et al., 2025; Yue et al., 2026)

