

Boy Mom Podcast Notes from Liz Busby on Navigating Video Games June, 2021

1. What are some helpful guidelines for kids and video games? I know some families who listen do not allow ANY video games, others struggle b/c their kids can't seem to get enough of them. Do you have any helpful suggestions for finding a balance there?

- Banning video games from your house is definitely a way to control screen time. But you **lose the chance to teach your children how to regulate** their video game use.
- Chances are, if they are interested in video games, they will buy some as soon as they leave your house and may struggle to keep them in their proper place in **college**.
- Or they will play them at **friends' homes** where you can't see what is going on.
- Video games are **just another form of media entertainment** like tv or books or social media. They have good parts and bad parts. Teaching your children how to use them positively can help.
- Consider looking into research by **Jane McGonigal**, she talks about how video games can be used in positive ways. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0CTPX-4Dlk&t=0s>); also her book Superbetter

Pros of video games:

- Video games are **interactive**, tv is passive. Doing vs watching.
- Video games can be **relationship building**. Co-op and multiplayer games let kids play together. Great way for siblings to learn to get along and have a shared interest.
- Even with parents! Kids who play games with their parents are **much more likely to come to talk to them when they have a problem**. Chances to "help" each other-- Farmville.
- Video games **build resilience**. Kids playing video games are failing 80% of the time. That's a lot of chances to get frustrated and learn how to pick yourself up and try again.

Cons of video games:

- Many modern games are **designed to be addictive**, just like social media. However, about 90% of gamers do not play in an addictive way. (<https://news.byu.edu/intellect/is-video-game-addiction-real>) This is where it's really important to teach your child how to manage this, to **recognize the tricks** the company is trying to use on them, and to reject them.
- Video games can promote online interaction with strangers, which can lead to your kids being exposed to **bad language, bullying, racism or sexism, pornography, or even being groomed by pedophiles**. (It's rare, but it really does happen.)
- Video games, like tv, can promote stereotypes and teach players to **objectify women**. This is especially dangerous for boys. (See Feminist Frequency for examples: <https://feministfrequency.com/>)

I would advise most families not to completely ban video games, but to educate themselves together and not let their kids play just everything that comes along.

2. How can moms choose the best video games IF they do choose to allow their kids to play?

Think about it like food:

- Step 1 - Lowest bar is "not poisonous": make sure what your child play isn't unsafe or exposing them to content they aren't ready for.
- Step 2 - But don't stop there! Some games are junk food and some are a balanced meal.
 - Is the game well made? Does it have interesting challenges and characters? What are the messages it sends?
- Step 3 - Just like food, even if it's healthy, you can't just eat all the time.
 - Kids have **infinite choices** now. It never ends. Compare to when we were young: once the kids' shows on TV ended, that was it, you had to go do something else. If you couldn't afford a video game, you had to do something else. With so much free content available, our kids will never run out. We have to **teach them to set limits** for themselves.

Practical resources for finding good quality games:

- **Common Sense Media!** Great source for game reviews that focus on content and age restrictions.
- If you can't find it there, try searching for the game name plus "reviews" or "parent guide"
- Don't be surprised if you can't find reviews for **phone/tablet games**. There are just so many that it's hard to review them all. But chances are, if there aren't reviews, it's a junk game.
- **YouTube and Twitch** are also good resources for seeing what the game is like. Search for the game title and "Let's Play" to find footage. Also try "mods," "online," "multiplayer," and "co-op" to see user generated content and interactions that are not included in the rating on the box.
- Consider **how the company is making a profit**. You get what you pay for. **If the game is free, your child is being sold**, either through ads (which you can't control the content of) or through in-game purchases (watch out for Loot Boxes or other randomized purchases designed to give a gambling-like high). Sometimes the whole game is just an ad for a TV show or toy. I suggest **sticking to titles that you can pay for**. \$60 for a top tier "triple A" game may seem like a lot, but it's the safest.
- Look for **reputable companies**. **Nintendo** is by far the best console for family friendly, non-junk games. Xbox, Playstation, and Steam (PC games) tend to focus on an older market so you'll need to do more research. Great preschool tablet games: **Sago Mini, Dr Panda, TocaBoca**. Big companies tend to be safer because they are more in the spotlight if a problem happens. Small companies can slide inappropriate content under the radar.
- Especially **be wary of free "educational" games**. These games tend to be junkware that doesn't work well and isn't really educational. Real educational software takes resources and research to create; lets kids explore and play in more than a set path. It will cost money, either directly from consumers or via a non-profit charity.

3. Are there safety precautions parents can take to protect their kids from online dangers while playing video games? (filters? etc.)

The filters for games are very individual per game and per gaming system. Do research on the platform your kid is playing on to find what parental control options are available. Try **Protect Young Eyes**, which has up-to-date guides for every device out there: <https://protectyoungeyes.com/parental-controls-every-digital-device/>

Most important thing: **online interactions cannot be rated or controlled.**

- For kids under 13, don't do games that involve online interaction. At all. Roblox is a huge one that I see parents allowing little kids to play. (Talk about Roblox condos.) If you wouldn't let your child play alone at a park or walk to the mall by themselves, they should not be playing at a digital playground alone.
- For under 13, do "couch" multiplayer games, which only let you play with people in the same room. Stick to those and play with friends/cousins/siblings/parents!
- Even for over 13, I would advise a lot of caution about online stranger interaction. Focus on playing games with friends they know. Think about if your teen is responsible enough and even then, check in frequently. Have the conversation about porn, stalkers, bullying, etc.
- Some safety features to look for in online games:
 - Look for **games that don't have a lot of custom skins or mods** that allow users to import sexual content.
 - Can you **mute the public chat**? People will spam pornography or inappropriate language.
 - **Check for adult content warnings**, depictions of customizable genitals and character sex, which are becoming more prevalent.
 - **Pay extra attention to the culture surrounding the game.** Search for the game name and "community." Take a look at the types of fan sites that come up. Search for the title with "harassment" or "sex" to see what comes up.

Set standards for how your family will play and why. The best limits for your kids are an internal filter! No filter is perfect.

- **Talk about the positive things your family wants from games.** Playing together, experiencing good stories, challenging puzzles, creative play, etc. Having this list written out will help you guide your kids to games that meet these needs, and reject impulse asks.
- **Who will they play with?** A good rule is to only play with those your teen knows in real life and who have similar standards to yours. What are your rules for video games at friends' houses?
- **What are the time limits? How will it be enforced?** It's easy to sink hours into these games without even realizing it. (My story, below)
- **Where will the game be played?** Make sure gaming computers are in public areas, not basements or bedrooms. Consider not allowing headphones if there's in-game chat, so you can tell what is said.

- **Discuss the dangers of gaming addiction.** Talk together about gaming addiction and how it destroys lives. Also talk about the dangers of pornography and other inappropriate language and content.
- **Discuss the content of games,** especially violence and objectification. Ask curious questions about why they think that character is dressed that way. Question why the game makes them do what they do. Ask why that character is male/female/old/young/Black/Hispanic and what the game is saying about them.

4. Any other wisdom from your research or experience you can share!?

The best thing you can do is play games with your kids. You may not be a gamer, but your kids will really remember the effort.

Great games for playing as a family:

- **Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime** - Weird name, but good game, especially if you are a beginner gamer. Your family is all on one ship, running around trying to manage all the stations and rescue space frogs and bunnies. Lots of co-operation and communication involved without complex controls. (all platforms)
- **Overcooked** - Run a kitchen together. Simple controls, but maddening to get right. (all platforms)
- **Untitled Goose Game** - New 2 player mode. Run around making mischief together. (all platforms)
- **Among Us** - This is a great one to play at a family gathering with teens, cousins, and aunts and uncles. Sort of like Mafia, Werewolf, or Murderer in the Dark. Nothing like the first time your child stabs you in the back, or when you get to repay the favor. (phone game)
- For couples: **It Takes Two**. Game about a couple thinking of divorce, their daughter makes a wish that turns them into dolls, they have to work together to get back.

My Story

The other month, I realized that we had slipped into a pattern of way too much screen time. Pandemic, homeschooling, moved to a new state, etc. etc. I called all the kids together and we drew a chart on the whiteboard with all the days of the week across the top. Down the side were different times of day like "before school," "after school," "after dinner," etc. We filled in this chart with all of the times we were using screen time and added up a total for each day. Before we even got to Saturday, **my 7yo said, "This is a lot. This is too much."**

With that buy in, we were able to slash our family screen time in half. We also talked about what things we wanted to do instead that we weren't having time to do because of video games. We scheduled in weekly family bike rides and board games, along with parent/child dates.