

## Gaming and Young Children

In the past few days you may have seen the news story about a 9 year old girl in the UK and her addiction to the game Fortnite. Over the course of this term teachers have been increasingly hearing students, from all ages across the school, discussing the game, and in particular the game 'Fortnite Battle Royale'. Whilst this game is not promoted as a violent game, as games such as Grand Theft Auto are, it is still an M restricted game, and as such is not recommended for anyone under the age of 16. Within Fortnite Battle Royale players battle other players to be the last character standing, and it is this element of the gameplay that makes it so addictive. The child in the news story was playing late at night after her parents went to bed and was choosing to wet herself rather than take a break from the game to go to the toilet.



There is a growing body of research that explains how game playing is changing and shaping the brains of young people. We know that game play close to bedtime affects sleep patterns. The blue light from screens and the stimulation from playing video games raises heart rate levels and releases adrenaline into the nervous system which can take many hours to properly dissipate enough to allow the body to enter deep sleep. Young people sleep less well after playing games close to bedtime, and can struggle to get to sleep at all. We know that tiredness affects mood and the capacity to cognitively function. Tired kids perform less well at school. The girl in the story was falling asleep in class at school.



Other research suggests that growing levels of anxiety can be linked to the over stimulation of gaming. Gaming, especially games involving killing others and surviving such as Fortnite Battle Royale, sends young people into a state

that activates the flight or fight response. Even 'creative' games such as Minecraft have 'survival' modes. In Minecraft zombies try to kill you at night and you must construct defenses to avoid this. Prolonged exposure to this state affects the body's ability to regulate the response through the production of stress-reducing hormones. Without the ability to regulate stress, children can be permanently in a heightened state of anxiety.



Empathy is seen as one of the 21st century's critical skills. Increasingly research is telling us that children who play violent video games have difficulty being empathetic. The exposure to games where killing others is the main focus, such as Fortnite Battle Royale, can make younger students lack empathy towards others and see that violence is an appropriate way of dealing with conflict. We know from research in war-torn countries that exposure to violence desensitizes young people and makes them more likely to react violently. The girl in the news article reacted violently when her parents tried to take her device from her. As many of you will be aware we have the Roots of Empathy programme happening in many of classes, to help teach our students to be empathetic, and our Restorative Practices approach to behaviour has building empathy as a central premise.



Technology is a powerful tool for communication, learning and enjoyment. There are also many acknowledged benefits to gaming such as teamwork, creativity, strategic thinking and problem solving, and the ability to multitask. As a school we cannot dictate how young people spend their time at home, but we would encourage parents to take an interest in what they are doing on their device, when they are doing it, and for how long, to make sure that it is appropriate for their age and emotional development.

By Zac Mills