

How to Help Children Addicted to Video Games - The Guide for Parents



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Introduction

- “I remember the child that Jason used to be...happy, energetic, and full of life. Now when I look at him these memories are fading. He tells me that I don't understand and that gaming *does* make him happy. But I just can't see it. He swears at me when I ask him to stop, no longer joins the family for dinner, and just doesn't seem to have any interests outside of his game. I feel like I have lost my son.”

Jennifer, mother of Jason (age 14)

- “I can't tell you how many nights I have spent crying about Kyle. I blame myself for bringing that damn game into our home. I'm angry at him for not realizing how he is throwing away his future. I'm angry at his father for not seeing this as a problem. Most of all, I'm angry at myself for letting this happen. Every night is nothing but yelling and screaming at each other. I don't know how much more of this our family can take.”

Christine, mother of Kyle (age 17)

- “I feel like I have tried everything to get him to cut back. For a while we thought that we were winning the battle – he only played during the times we allowed him each night. Then, his teacher told us that he was literally falling asleep in class almost every day. It turns out that he had secretly bought a laptop and was playing in his room after we thought he was asleep. Oh, and he was stealing our neighbor's wireless connection so that he could play.”

David, father of Carter (age 16)

- “So, I thought it was just a stage he was going through. It seems like all boys get interested in video games so we really didn't see much a problem with Jeremy playing as well. I have to wonder if his habits are really normal though? I mean, should a kid really sit in front of a computer for seven hours straight? I'm ashamed to say that there have been times that he actually soiled himself while playing rather than go to the washroom. And I just wonder, how did this happen so fast?”

Megan, mother of Jeremy (age 11)

- “I know my son is smart, but his grades sure don't show it anymore. He was an A student for all of his life and we had such high hopes for him. He talked about being a dentist for as long as I can remember. But now, all he does is play that stupid game and doesn't even care that he failed two classes last term.”

Lisa, mother of Andrew (age 15)

* Quotes are used with permission from parents. Names have been changed.*

Hello fellow parents and thank you for purchasing this guide to help you regain control of your child's video game habits.

To be honest, I wish this guide was entirely unnecessary:

I wish school grades were always more of a priority than computer games.

I wish that parents never had to argue with their children about being obsessed with video games.

I wish that game designers relied far less on tactics clearly intended to encourage excessive play.

I wish that everyone (children included) had the ability to set healthy limits on video game time.

Back to reality...

In the real world, we know that for *certain* people, with *certain* traits, combined with *certain* games, the results can be disastrous. Formerly exceptional students start failing classes. Formerly outgoing teens become tied to computer monitors for upwards of 10 hours per day. Formerly respectful children become rude, angry, and violent towards those who dare to limit or remove their gaming consoles or computers.

Is this an addiction? Officially, no. To date, the American Medical Association has rejected proposals to classify excessive video game play as a mental disorder. This decision was based on the current lack of research and scientific consensus on the addictive nature of some video games. This may very well change in the future, but for now we have to accept the fact that many people (health professionals included) may not view excessive video game play as a legitimate problem. Perhaps you have even had an encounter with a psychologist, therapist, or counsellor who downplayed concerns about your child's video game habits in search of the true "underlying problem".

Frustrating, isn't it?

Yes, of course excessive gaming can occur in response to other difficulties (for example, depression or social anxiety). But, and this is the point many health professionals still seem to miss, excessive gaming can almost certainly exist independently as *the* primary problem...*and* as the underlying cause of *other* difficulties.

For the sake of this manual (and to avoid always using phrases like "excessive gaming" and "unhealthy habits" for the next 200 pages), let's call this what *you* already know to be true:

"Video Game Addiction".

How to Use this Manual

As you read through this manual, you should start to feel more educated and informed about the nature of video games, the culture of gamers, the signs of video game addiction, the reasons that a child would become addicted, the consequences of excessive play, and most importantly, your options for intervention as a parent or caregiver.

I have purposefully written this manual to be as honest and straightforward as possible. As a parent with a child who is addicted to video games, you already know just how difficult it is to break the grip of addiction, and get back the child you know is still there.

I can say right now that simply *reading* this manual will not solve the problem of your child's video game addiction. In order to get the most out of the material provided, you *must* commit to completing the various exercises, properly assess the extent of the problem, be very honest about past efforts to deal with the problem, and be willing to try new intervention strategies.

I will also forewarn that although many parents hope that the minimal / least intrusive interventions will be sufficient, this is not always the case with a serious addiction. I will of course, discuss strategies for moderation, self-control, and distraction. If these techniques work for your child – great! However, if the addiction is too strong to respond to these interventions, you must be prepared to take more difficult steps, including going “cold turkey” and completely removing the game(s) and all access from your home. Obviously, this is the more difficult path and will be met with extreme resistance from your child, but it *is* sometimes necessary. Don't worry, I will discuss all of these options and more at great length in the sections to follow.

Recognize that it would be impossible to implement all (or even most) of the suggestions and tips in this manual. Your situation is unique and so must be the approach to helping your child. Try the interventions and suggestions that seem most appropriate for your child. If it is clear that your selected strategy is not working...regroup, reassess, hold on to what does seem to be helpful, drop what is not working, and add something new to your overall approach. Even for one-to-one, in-person sessions with parents, it is very normal to modify the treatment approach based on what seems to be effective and what has been unsuccessful. Just make sure that you give each strategy a fair chance to help before moving on to something else.

One final point:

There are many activities contained here that ask for written answers and reflection. It is essential that you actually *write down* your answers and thoughts. Doing so will highlight the extent of the difficulty and will guide intervention decisions for your child. Even if it feels awkward at first, please write down your answers to the questions and activities. If you fail to do so you will get *far* less out of this workbook and may potentially sacrifice your child's recovery.

Best wishes to you and your child as you begin the path to recovery,

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PART I:

Information and Education



Video Game Addiction in Children: Questions & Answers

Why did you write this manual?

Actually, I held back on writing this book for many years. When I first became interested in working with video game and internet addictions I wondered just how common this problem was, and, whether it even *was* a problem that needed attention. As I started working with clients addicted to video games, the fact that this problem was all too real was quickly confirmed. A few examples:

A couple watching their marriage fall apart as one partner (and in several cases *both* partners) became addicted to online role playing games.

A successful professional finding himself unable to find a 35 hour per week gaming habit – even after losing a job he had spent twenty years working towards.

A university student addicted to a MMORPG sitting in my office with a transcript full of Fs (previously an A-student), losing thousands of dollars in scholarships, and being forced to leave school.

Unable to keep up with the demand for help, but wanting to at least offer *something* to those who contacted me, I wrote [The Computer, Internet, & Videogame Addiction Workbook](#) and eventually started offering it on the TechAddiction website.

What I was not prepared for was the number of *parents* who were desperately seeking help for children who were addicted to video games. E-mail messages from parents looking for guidance became a daily occurrence (as I write this, two such messages have appeared in my inbox over the last hour). While I will always respond to any parent that contacts me and will try to provide helpful advice and referrals, ultimately this does not seem sufficient. Unless one happens to live in a major city of significant size, finding a psychologist or counsellor who specializes in treating video game addiction is virtually impossible. I do believe that this situation will improve as the years go on and the impact of video game addiction is better understood within the mental health professions. For now however, it is sometimes even difficult to find a mental health professional who considers video game addiction to be a “true” problem, much less someone who also specializes in treating it.

My hope is that this manual will, first and foremost, be helpful to the thousands of parents who are struggling to regain control of their children’s video game habits. I hope that the exercises provided will be helpful in assessing the seriousness of the problem, and that the information, advice, and techniques are helpful in breaking this addiction that has overtaken your child.

What are the types of video games that children and teens play?

As a parent, you may already know that it is important to become familiar with the labels assigned to video games by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Among other responsibilities, the ESRB independently assigns ratings for the interactive entertainment software industry (see more on the ESRB in a later section). You may already know that a video game rated “M” (Mature) has been deemed inappropriate for young players.

You may be less familiar with the numerous genres of video games and their relative potential for addiction. Let’s take a quick look at the main types of video games and how they may differ with regard to the potential for addiction.

Keep in mind that the “Potential for Addiction” category, while based on emerging research and my own experience with clients, remains only an opinion and not a definitive classification by any means. Still, since many parents are quite unfamiliar with these games and terms, you may find it helpful to know which genre your child’s favorite game is categorized in. Having some sense of the potential for addiction may also prevent certain games from entering your home in the future.

Another point: “Potential for Addiction” is a *relative* classification. That is, a genre in the “Very Much Above Average” category is certainly not guaranteed to result in addiction. Thousands (and in some cases, millions) of people play these games without becoming addicted. This is very similar to how millions of people can gamble responsibly without becoming addicted...but not everyone. The point is that compared to games in other categories, the potential for becoming addicted to these particular games appears to be considerably greater.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG or MMO)



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Very Much Above Average**
- In my own practice, MMOs such as World of Warcraft, Lineage, Runescape, & Guild Wars are, *by far*, the genre that results in the most requests for assistance from parents (see page 32 for why this genre is the most problematic).
- MMOs are mostly played on computers, but consoles and mobile devices with online capabilities (e.g., XBOX One and PS4) are also used to play. Although MMOs *can* be played offline, this is very rare and essentially defeats the entire purpose of the game (i.e., multiplayer and online). In a MMO, players create, develop, and control characters that exist as part of an online fantasy world. The world is always evolving as the players themselves have a great deal of control over how to develop their characters, complete quests, align with others, and even create new areas of the online universe. MMOs often require monthly subscriptions and have no pre-determined “end”. Players can put upwards of 40 hours per week into the game for years and will never see “Game Over”. There are always new groups to join, new missions to complete, and new abilities for one’s character to gain.
- Sample gameplay from [WoW](#)

Real Time Strategy (RTS)



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Above Average**
- A real time strategy game is generally a resource gathering / resource building game which, as the name implies, happens in real time (i.e., the players do not take turns making moves). These games often involve building empires or civilizations, war, managing worlds, and working with simulated economies. They often have a top-down perspective and to a non-gamer, may appear to have less impressive or realistic graphics. Popular RTS series include Age of Empires, Command and Conquer, and Company of Heroes.
- RTS games can be played offline, but the vast majority of players compete against others online. Much like MMOs, RTS games usually have no ending and can be played indefinitely with unique gameplay experiences. As you may have noticed, one of the appealing elements of the most addictive video games is the unique challenge of playing with and against other humans. Even the most advanced single person game will eventually start to produce repeat experiences for the player – which leads to boredom and eventually quitting the game. Imagine a tennis player practicing with a serving machine. Even if the machine has 100 different types of serves, eventually the player will get bored and want to play against a human player for a more engaging experience. The same is true for online games: Human players add the elements of unpredictability and emotion – which keep the player coming back for the unique experience.
- Sample gameplay from [Company of Heroes](#)

First Person Shooter (FPS)



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Above Average**
- FPS games are framed as if the player is “in” the game world. Typically, the player sees only his hand or weapon when actually playing the game. Popular games in this genre include Halo, Call of Duty, and the Battlefield series.
- Occasionally, shooters will pull back from the first person perspective into a third person mode. The series Gears of War is an example of a *third person* shooter - the player sees his full character onscreen, but the general gameplay is very similar to a FPS.
- Compared to MMOs and RTS games, first person shooters often have engaging single player modes that can take twenty or more hours to complete (even more on harder difficulty settings). Once again though, the greater draw is the interactive online component in which the user competes against other human players. These matches sometimes involve “free for alls” (everyone against everyone else), but more often involve team competitions.
- Recently, online FPS games have been adding some of the elements often thought to encourage excessive play in MMOs (such as leveling systems, achievement points, and very detailed statistical tracking).
- Sample gameplay from [Call of Duty](#)

Action



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Average**
- This is somewhat of a catch-all category for games usually presented from a third person perspective and often encourages the player to assume the role of a predefined character. That is, the player does not usually create his own character (as in a MMO) or imagines himself as existing in the game world (as in a FPS). Rather, he takes the role of a character with an appearance, story line, and gameplay tasks that are essentially set for him.
- In contrast to the previous game genres, action games are primarily single player experiences. Also, they generally have predefined goals and clear endings. As such, they may be less addictive than MMO, RTS, and FPS games. Again however, this appears to be changing as developers are starting to add multiplayer online components to these traditionally single player games.
- Popular games in this genre include Grand Theft Auto, Metal Gear Solid, and Assassin's Creed. The most popular games often have violent / mature content.
- Sample gameplay from [Metal Gear Solid](#).

Sports



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Average**
- Sports games tend to be more popular with teens than younger children. Every major sport has several video game franchises devoted to it. It is common for new versions of existing franchise to be released yearly – typically at the start of the respective seasons in the real world. Most games now feature “GM modes” in which you take control of other aspects of your favorite team such as making trades, signing free agents, building your reputation, and much more. Games simulating major sports also include full-season modes in which a player must complete an entire regular season and playoffs. Using the NHL as an example, this translates into 82 regular season games and up to 28 playoff games.
- Sports games tend to have quite a bit of replay value, as the gamer will be rewarded for playing through multiple seasons, with multiple teams, and by completing specific tasks during the seasons (e.g., win three consecutive championships). As you can imagine, completing multiple seasons and the various tasks can be very time consuming.
- Online play is a very strong appeal of sports games as most players prefer to match their skills against human players – often for the bragging rights associated with extensive online tracking of statistics.
- Sample gameplay from [NHL 2015](#)

Fighter



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Slightly Below Average**
- Fighters almost always emphasize one-to-one combat against either a computer character or a human player (either in person or online), but there are a few exceptions to this rule (for example, Super Smash Brothers features four-player matches). Popular franchises include Tekken, Mortal Kombat, and Dead or Alive.
- Fighters often have a pick-up-and-play feel which allows newcomers to the genre to start playing without a heavy investment of time. However, many fighters also have considerable “depth” to them, and more advanced players may put in many hours perfecting moves and stringing together complicated attacks.
- One of the factors which may limit the relative potential for addiction in fighters is the structure of the matches. In contrast to all of the genres previously discussed, a single game / match in a fighter typically only lasts a few minutes. As such, the player frequently encounters “Game Over” screens, which can serve as a reminder to quit and move on to something else. Having to frequently restart one’s progress may prevent the extended gaming sessions more common in MMO and RTS games. Of course, there are still those who play games in this genre far too much. In my experience though, fighters tend to be one piece of a gaming addiction spanning multiple games and genres – unlike an addiction to a MMO in which a single title is often the only game being played.
- Sample gameplay from [Tekken 6](#)

Racing



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Below Average**
- Racing games have a somewhat smaller market share compared to the other genres discussed above. There are several popular franchises such as Need for Speed, Burnout, and Gran Turismo that often see yearly updates. The single-player experience is a significant component of most racing games and often serves as a training ground for players who later go online and compete against others. Similar to fighters, one of the factors that may prevent excessive gaming is the fact that there is a distinct beginning and end to online match-ups. Essentially, players choose their vehicle, choose their opponent, choose their track, and race to the end after a few minutes of play (and of course, there *must* be an end because this is a race after all). Players may also compete in circuits (multiple tracks with the same online opponents), but again, these also will come to an end after no more than 30 minutes.
- Racers are often categorized into either “simulation” (focused on realistic control, upgrades, and tracks), or “arcade” (focused on simplified controls, weapons, greatly exaggerated upgrades, and sometimes fantasy environments).
- Sample gameplay from [Gran Turismo 6](#).

Music



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Below Average**
- The most popular music games include the Rock Band and Guitar Hero franchises. Although Guitar Hero started out with a single guitar, it followed the lead of Rock Band and now includes lead and bass guitars, drums, and singing. Music games are largely based on rhythm, timing, and mastery through repetition. Players attempt to match falling notes on the screen using physical controllers that replicate actual instruments. A large appeal of these games is the ability to download tracks and albums (for a fee) by one's favorite artists.
- Music games have single player and online components, but the largest appeal lies in the local multiplayer experience (i.e., playing with friends in the same physical location). There are those who become obsessed with perfecting songs and put many many hours into just one song (go to YouTube and search for "guitar hero expert dragonforce" for several almost unbelievable examples), but these titles are often (but not always) "party games". What this means is that they are best when played with friends, family, and others who are in the same room at the same time. These games may be set up for a few hours during a party or get-together and then put away until the next time people visit. Players who use the game like this are unlikely to become addicted, while players who focus on perfecting the solo experience may be more likely to develop unhealthy habits.
- Sample gameplay from [RockBand 2](#).

Casual / Puzzle



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Below Average** (at least for children and teens)
- Casual games often overlap with the puzzle genre. Games usually are pick-up-and-play and are very easy to learn. These games often only last a few minutes, but encourage multiple sessions to “make it to that next level.” Popular themes in casual games include “match-three colors”, “castle defense”, and simplified 2-D shooters.
- These games are more popular with older gamers than teens and children. There are those who could accurately be described as “obsessed” with certain casual games. However, the level of gameplay rarely approaches the level of addiction seen with MMO, RTS, and FPS games. Casual games are often methods of procrastination when one *should* be working at the computer, but instead plays “just one game” before starting work. Of course, one game frequently leads to multiple games and lost productivity.
- Sample gameplay from [Bejeweled](#).

- **Platformer**



- Potential for Addiction Compared to Other Genres: **Considerably Below Average**
- Platformers traditionally involved taking control of a cartoonish character to run and jump between levels and platforms while avoiding or defeating enemies. Classic platformers were two-dimensional and the goal was often to simply run from left to right and reach the end of the level (which was often more difficult than it sounds). As a parent reading this manual, you may be familiar with or may have even played the original Super Mario Brothers on the first Nintendo system. Platformers have evolved over the years and now have less linear gameplay. They remain relatively cartoonish compared to most other modern video games.
- Most platformers have clear endgames and have relatively little replay value after the game is over. They also are primarily single player games with very limited online support. Hence, compared to online games featuring user generated characters, worlds, and experiences, relatively few people become addicted to platformers.
- Sample gameplay from [Super Mario 3D World](#).

Who are the kids that become addicted to video games?

In my practice, video game addicts are almost universally “good kids”, and I might add, with good parents. Prior to becoming addicted to video games the children are generally quite caring, respectful, and high-achievers in school. The parents are almost always very loving, caring, and concerned about their children. Very often both parents work outside the home and have successful careers and/or university degrees. Yes, there are exceptions to these general rules, but overall the families are generally high-functioning and supportive. In a word, “normal”.

Other general trends with regard to the characteristics / conditions that may make a child more likely to get addicted to gaming, include:

- Starting gaming at an **early age** (for example, six years old or younger).
- Being of **above average intelligence**. In brief, the theory is that some types of games provide certain intellectual challenges and appeal to “problem solvers”...all wrapped up in highly entertaining packages.
- Kids with large periods of **unstructured time** after school or on weekends. Although after-school activities, clubs, and organized sports do not completely prevent video game addiction, they do seem to reduce the likelihood of it developing (and can be helpful when addressing the problem after it has developed).
- Children with access to **computers or video game consoles in their rooms**. Obviously, the easier it is to play and the more difficult it is for parents to monitor, the more likely it is for an addiction to develop.
- Children with **few real world friends or who struggle socially**. Again, this is not a *necessary* condition, but it does seem to make video game addiction more likely.
- Children from **middle class or upper-middle class families**. The theory here is that these families can *afford* to supply their children with the latest technology needed to play the games, the games themselves which can be quite expensive, and the monthly subscriptions to the online worlds in which the most addictive games take place.
- Children with **attention or concentration difficulties**. One may believe that for someone with concentration problems, a video game addiction would actually be *less likely* to develop – since gaming requires extended periods of inactivity and focus. However, this does not seem to be the case. Rather, children who have great difficulty paying attention in school, staying focused while reading a book, or sitting still during dinner, appear to be more easily captivated by the variety of

audio and visual stimulation and the reward systems present in the most addictive video games.

- **Males.** Although more and more girls are playing games, boys (and men) remain the primary consumers of the technology. This alone would translate into a greater number of male video game addicts. However, boys also tend to be more interested in massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), real time strategy games (RTS), “sandbox” games (such as Minecraft), and first person shooters (FPS) – the game genres most likely to encourage and reward excessive play. Please note that throughout this manual I generally refer to the gamer in the masculine form (“he” or “him”). However, girls can and do become addicted to video games and the advice and exercises in this book are just as applicable to female gamers.

What are the signs of video game addiction in a child?

Again, keep in mind that video game addiction is not yet an official clinical diagnosis recognized by the psychological or psychiatric communities. Still, based on work with many families whose lives have been negatively impacted by obsessive video game play and research on children who become addicted to video games, it does seem possible to put forward an unofficial list of the signs and symptoms that a child may be addicted to online games.

Although individual researchers and clinicians will have their own ways of conceptualizing video game addiction, these definitions do share much in common. I have found it useful to organize the signs and symptoms into four general categories:

A) Psychological Signs

- **Decreased interest in school, homework, and academic achievement.** This may take the form of homework neglect, decreased study time, and a deterioration in grades. Often, a child who is becoming addicted to video games will claim that he has no homework or has completed it in school. Ask yourself if this seems to be different from the time before the excessive play began. If so, you may want to consider contacting his teacher and ask to be updated on whether homework is being completed on time.
- **Becoming visibly angry when not allowed to play** or when asked to stop. In extreme cases this may result in violence towards the parent and is a clear indication that major changes must be made in the household. While this guide should prove to be helpful, you should contact a professional for a more personalized treatment plan if your child is at risk for becoming violent.
- **Becoming depressed or anxious when access to the game is limited.** Associated behaviors will include claims that “nothing else is fun”, restlessness, and possibly excessive sleep. You may have noticed this in more extreme forms if you have ever gone “cold turkey” and attempted to eliminate all games from your home. Alternatively, these signs may be present in a milder form when the computer is unavailable for a day or two.
- **Thinking about the game when involved in other activities.** Although this symptom (daydreaming about the game) will, for obvious reasons, be less apparent than some of the more overt signs, in a child this may occasionally be seen in drawings or writings. Teachers may notice that the child is less “present” in class and that he is often unaware of the question being asked when called on.
- **Dreaming about the game.** This one is even less obvious, as the only way to know if this is happening is to ask your child.

- **Loss of interest in activities he previously enjoyed.** Although interest in schoolwork is often the first to decrease, other perhaps more enjoyable activities such as sports, music, hobbies, and spending time with friends are often sacrificed in favor of gaming.
- **Arguing about the negative impact of excessive play and downplaying how serious the problem is.** In a younger child, he may compare himself to a friend who “plays even more than I do”. In a teen, this will often take the form of “Well, at least I’m not out on the street or using drugs”. Occasionally, parents will also fall into this particular trap. Please be careful that you or your partner do not use this reasoning to justify unhealthy levels of gameplay.
- **Distorted perception of time.** Video game addicts often experience the sensation of a very slow passage of time. That is, what feels like an hour may actually be three hours. When asked to estimate just how long they have been playing, children and teens (especially those who are heavily addicted) may vastly underestimate their gaming time.
- **Feelings of excessive responsibility to a guild, clan, or online team.** If you are not already familiar with these terms, they refer to a group of players that one joins in MMOs such as World of Warcraft or Everquest. This is a central feature of these particular games and one of the main factors that contribute to the higher levels of addictiveness in MMOs (see the next section for *why* MMOs tend to be the genres most likely to result in addiction). Although these games can be played solo, in order to advance far in the game a player must align with others. If he only plays solo, some sections and worlds will be inaccessible, as will certain abilities and upgrades. Essentially, there is very little incentive to continue playing MMOs unless you join an online team of other players. As a member of one of these teams, there is the expectation that the player will participate in ongoing quests. Often these quests must take place when all members of the team are online (which can frequently lead to unusual meeting times as members will often be in different time zones). There is an expectation not to let the team down by missing quests, as this will impede the progress of the entire team. Also, to contribute to the team, it is expected that individual players continue to develop their characters by making them stronger, more powerful, and with more abilities. As you can imagine, these expectations create a very powerful sense of responsibility to the team and intense feelings of guilt if one is not able (or permitted) to play.
- **Great difficulty abstaining from video games for an extended period of time.** If a child is addicted to a video game, he may be able to avoid playing for a day with some discomfort (especially if he knows that play will be possible tomorrow), will find it quite challenging to abstain for several days, and will find it extremely difficult to give up the game for an entire week. In some cases, the child will even show signs of withdrawal (see more on the signs of withdrawal on page 208).

- Older teens that are more aware of the negative consequences of excessive gaming may experience **feelings of guilt or regret after long sessions of gaming**. This is actually a good sign as it indicates that the person is aware of the problem and may be motivated to change his behavior with the right kind of support and assistance.

B) Physical Signs

- **Sleep difficulties or dramatic changes in sleep schedules.** The most obvious changes in sleep habits will be a tendency to stay awake longer at night so that gaming can continue, and consequently, greater difficulty rising in the morning. If your child has a computer or console in his room, do not assume that he is asleep just because the lights are out. Addicted gamers will intentionally wake up to play in the middle of the night when other family members are asleep. While having the game in his own room makes this very easy to do, removing the system will not necessarily stop the behavior as an addicted gamer may risk playing in a “common room” late at night if no one else is awake.
- **Decreased attention to personal hygiene.** For many children and teens, hygiene can be a low priority even in the best of times. However, when one is addicted to video games, personal care will often take a backseat to continued play. Showers decrease in frequency – often several days apart. Brushing teeth, cleaning up before bed / school, and general facial-care and hair-care are all neglected. In extreme cases (as reflected in the quote from one parent at the start of this book), children may wait too long before using the washroom...with unfortunate but not unexpected results.
- **Poor or irregular eating habits.** For a child who is addicted to video games, regular meal times and healthy eating will not be priorities. Convenience, rather than nutrition, will be most important when it comes to eating. The child may start to request that meals be allowed while playing the game (please do not allow this!), that he be allowed to eat apart from the family, and / or may skip meals entirely. Obvious weight gain or loss may be apparent.
- **Headaches, dry eyes, and sore fingers.** While sore fingers are relatively rare (gaming controllers are generally quite comfortable these days), headaches and dry eyes are much more common after extended gaming sessions.

- **Decreased levels of physical health.** As physical activities, sports, and other forms recreation are sacrificed in favor of gaming, this will generally result in a deterioration in overall physical health. This will be most apparent in a child or teen who is involved in structured physical activities or sports (for example, coaches or trainers may notice decreased performance and intensity). Unfortunately, this often leads to the child concluding that he no longer wants to be involved in the activity, as he can no longer compete at the level he was used to. Of course, this also allows him to spend even more time gaming, which leads to even worse physical health...and the system is now in place for gaming to completely replace healthier activities.

C) Behavioral Signs

- **Decreased academic performance.** As a rule, A and B-students do not go from consistently achieving good grades to failing classes in the course of one semester. More likely is a gradual decrease in achievement over the course of a full academic year. Strong students especially will be able to “coast” on past learning for a while even as gaming becomes more of a priority in their lives. They may be able to convince their parents that the slight deterioration in grades was just one bad semester, due to a poor teacher, or some other aberration. However, as the year progresses an addicted gamer will start losing ground and he will fail to integrate new educational material. Now in the second semester, it becomes clear to parents that this “aberration” is more of a downward trend. It is not until these poor grades spill over into a second year that many parents become convinced that something is clearly wrong and that intervention is necessary. Looking back, when did your child start to show signs of gaming addiction? Don’t be too hard on yourself if it took some time to realize the extent of the problem – this is *very* normal.
- Going hand-in-hand with the previous point is a tendency to put **less effort into homework and studying**. Parents of young children may notice that they rush through their homework as quickly as possible with little attention to detail, and with less pride in their work compared to the period before the game entered their lives. Parents of teens may be informed by their child that homework was completed at school, completed before the parents arrived home, or that “my teachers this year do not assign much homework”. If you have any doubts about what you are being told by your child regarding homework, do not hesitate to contact his teacher.
- Children who are addicted to video games will start **neglecting other important responsibilities in order to keep gaming**. Household responsibilities and chores will be completed much later than requested by parents, only after multiple requests (even more so than usual), or not completed at all. Even if other rewards such as allowances are tied to completion of household chores, an addicted gamer may sacrifice these rewards as long as he can continue playing.

- An obvious sign of someone who is addicted to video games, is that they spend **more and more time playing the game**. Although there is no set threshold that one passes before he is considered addicted to video games, obviously the more one plays the more this will interfere with other aspects of life. A child who is addicted to video games can easily put in 20, 30, or 40+ hours per week. Again, a child will not immediately go from playing one or two hours per week to 40 hours. Rather, parents should look for a gradual increase week over week, month over month as the child progresses in the game. Much of this increased time commitment has to do with the “leveling” systems in the most addictive MMORPGs (see the following section on why video games are addictive for more on this topic).
- A child who is addicted to video games will **attempt to play at the first available opportunity**. Common times include upon waking up in the morning, immediately after arriving home from school, immediately after dinner in the evening, and immediately after rushing through homework. These are generally viewed as “danger times” and will be addressed later on in this manual.
- A very good sign of video game addiction (but one that you are unlikely to see), is **an inability to quit despite a desire to do so**. True, you have probably observed the *inability* to quit, but probably not the *desire* to quit. The symptom is generally reserved for adults and older teens who have gained insight into the problem and who have recognized the destructive nature of their addiction. Having your child *want* to quit is a desirable but certainly not necessary condition for recovery. As the parent of a minor child you still have the power and control necessary to remove this temptation from your child’s life. Of course, this is not true for the parent of an adult child, as the gamer himself must get to a point where he wants to quit before recovery will begin.
- A video game addict who is not actively playing will frequently busy himself with **reading about the game, discussing the game with fellow players in online forums, or writing about the game** (for example, compiling strategies and game plans for the next session). Quick point: Just because your child is not currently playing the game, if he is on the computer he may still be engaged in activities that are feeding the addiction.
- A child or teen that is addicted to video games may **spend large portions of his allowance or income from a job on gaming accessories, expansion packs, computer upgrades, and micro-transactions**. If you are not aware of what a micro-transaction is, it is a small online purchase (typically only a dollar or two) for largely superficial game upgrades (for example, a new costume for his character, a single weapon, or small ability). Is your child permitted to spend money on video games and accessories? Although fostering a sense of financial responsibility is important for a child to learn, if he is addicted to games, you may want to reconsider this decision.

- A very good sign that video game addiction is a reality for your child, is **frequent (or even occasional) gaming “binges”**. This may take the form of seven or more hours of non-stop gaming (very short breaks may be present). Although there is no single behavior that signifies a gaming addiction, frequent gaming binges (e.g., weekly) interspersed with regular play between binges, is a very good indication that your child is addicted to video games and that this needs to be addressed.

D) Relational Signs

- A child who is addicted to video games and is aware that his parents disapprove **may resort to lying when it becomes apparent that the game may be disallowed or restricted**. Interestingly, you may encounter lying in the middle stages of gaming addiction and confrontation, but if the addiction strengthens its grip and your child is fully aware that he can no longer hide his habits, he may become very upfront with you and make no attempt to hide how much he plays. It is at this point that many parents believe that all hope is lost. It isn't. You still have options. Difficult options, but options nonetheless (don't worry, I will get to *exactly* what these options are in later sections of this workbook).
- Video game addiction in children may be present when, on most occasions, the child **would rather play video games than play (child) or go out socially (teen) with his friends**. Keep in mind that the child may claim that he *is* socializing with his friends when he plays. This is true to some extent, so don't bother getting into an argument about semantics and the definition of “friends”. However, these friendships are still built around an artificial experience that does not require or encourage the development of critical social and interpersonal skills that are absolutely required for one to function, succeed, and contribute to society as a healthy adult. Childhood to late adolescence is a complex and extremely important period of psychosocial development in which one ideally builds self-worth, begins to develop an identity, and learns how to make meaningful interpersonal connections with others. This cannot happen if the virtual world replaces the real world.
- As children become adolescents, it is actually quite normal for them to spend less time with family and more time with friends. Although the total amount of interpersonal contact remains essentially the same, the proportion of time shifts from family to friends. So, it really is healthy for a teen to spend less time with his parents and more time with his friends (assuming that his friends are positive influences) as he progresses through adolescence. What isn't healthy, is when this **decrease in parental time is primarily replaced with gaming and online-only friends**.

- Parents or primary caregivers will almost certainly be the first to become worried about a child who is addicted to video games. As the problem continues to develop, other individuals such as relatives, family friends, teachers, and friends of the child may also start to express concern. When **others whom you trust and respect begin to notice problems**, this is again a very good sign that your child is addicted to video games. Also, if you feel the need to downplay or hide just how much your child plays, this suggests that your child's may be losing control of his gaming habits.
- Video game addicts, when confronted about their habits may **blame others (especially parents) for their excessive play**. This is mainly observed in adolescents, not young children. For example, a parent may hear "I wouldn't play so much if you didn't nag all the time". Keep in mind that parents should not automatically dismiss criticism from their children (we *all* have areas for personal development). But...it is important to distinguish potentially helpful feedback ("How can you tell me that *I* am addicted when *you* get drunk every weekend?") from the defensive / deflecting voice of the addiction.

Why are video games addictive?

Let me start off by saying that I think this may be the wrong question to ask.

I think we can legitimately ask “Why is alcohol addictive?” and “Why are cigarettes addictive?” and then begin to answer the questions. Take cigarettes for example. Regardless of whether I am studying Marlboros, Winstons, or Camels, I am likely to come to the same conclusions. Whether I am studying kings, 100s, lights, non-menthol, or menthol, I am also likely to come to the same general conclusions. The underlying factors contributing to addiction do not vary significantly from brand to brand, or from cigarette type to cigarette type.

The same can *not* be said about video games.

I do not believe that all video games are even *close* to being equally addictive, or encourage excessive play with the same underlying mechanisms and gameplay elements (and the research is certainly consistent with this theory).

Based on everything we know about video game addiction, there are clearly some genres that are far more addictive than others. Specifically, MMORPG, RTS, Sandbox, and FPS games appear to be most likely to result in addiction for those at risk. Although people occasionally claim (usually jokingly) to be “addicted” to games like Solitaire and Bejeweled, these gameplay habits are not in the same category as someone who is truly addicted to World of Warcraft.

Although I have no way of knowing exactly which game your child is addicted to, I am very confident that it is either a MMORPG, RTS, or FPS.

I believe that the conceptualization of *all* game genres under the umbrella term of “video games” has been partially responsible for the inconsistent research on video game addiction...and also the slow movement towards legitimizing this as a true addiction.

Therefore, we should not ask the question:

“Why are video games addictive?”

Rather, it is far more informative to ask:

“Why are MMORPG more likely to result in addiction than other types of games?”

What is it about these games that encourage such extreme levels of play and emotional attachments? Read on...

- **In-game rewards are based on a leveling system.** When starting a MMORPG a player's character begins with very basic attributes with regard to experience, strength, intelligence, courage, powers, etc. Initially, it takes very little play (perhaps minutes) to reach the next level and gain new skills - this is immediately rewarding and reinforces continued play. However, each successive level takes more play time to reach - eventually taking weeks or months to level-up. By this time however, the gamer has gradually adapted and accepted the greater effort required to reach the next level. This follows the very basic (but effective) sales technique of asking for a small commitment initially, followed by greater and greater commitments after the player / customer has invested time, money, or energy in the product. Imagine if the very first levels (e.g., from Level 1 to Level 2) took a full month rather than several minutes - how many players would find this rewarding enough to continue?
- **There is no end to the game.** This is one of the defining features of a MMORPG. Unlike many other types of video games, a MMORPG has no ultimate goal or point at which a player can say "I'm finished. I have completed every quest - there is nothing new to discover". As such, there is never the experience of "Game Over" - a point which signifies the natural end to a game. Although some games with a "leveling" system have a maximum possible level (at least until the next expansion pack is released), there may be elaborate "endgames" than are even *more* time consuming than the leveling section which preceded them. Read more about endgames on page 70.
- **The appeal of making social connections.** While many video games are solitary activities, MMORPGs encourage, and in many ways, require that players interact socially with each other - which feeds the universal human need for interpersonal connections. However, with video game addicts, these connections can come at the expense of real-world relationships.
- **MMORPGs encourage play and collaboration with gamers worldwide.** This is true of online multiplayer video games in general. The fact that two users on opposite sides of the world can interact and join together in a common quest adds to the excitement and exploratory nature of MMORPGs.
- All MMORPGs have **some form of in-game currency.** The same goals and emotions which drive people to pursue wealth in the real world are also present in MMORPGs. As one amasses more virtual wealth (by spending more time playing and completing tasks), the virtual wealth translates into greater power, control, respect, influence, status, and purchasing power - which are obviously very seductive pursuits.

- It is **easy to view video games as harmless recreational activities**. Whereas there is great awareness among young people on the dangers of alcohol or drug abuse, online gaming is generally seen as a harmless and very normal hobby. Is it less harmful than alcohol addiction? Absolutely. Can most young people play without becoming addicted? Probably, yes. However, because of this it is also more difficult for parents to recognize when a real problem exists, and for players to acknowledge that their gaming habits have become unhealthy and destructive.
- **Rewards often are set on variable schedules**. It has been consistently demonstrated in psychological research that variable ratio (reinforced after an average number of attempts) or variable interval schedules (reinforced after an average time period has elapsed) produces a steady rate of responding and are quite difficult to extinguish (e.g., slot machines use variable ratio schedules to encourage maximum play time). For example, in a MMORPG, a player may be rewarded on average for every five tasks completed. Sometimes it will take only one try while other times it may take 15 - the player never really knows how long it will take before the big reward comes - but he knows that if he plays long enough it will come eventually. This type of reward schedule encourages longer periods of play even in the absence of rewards. For a more detailed analysis of the ways people respond to different patterns of in-game rewards, see the article [Behavioral Game Design](#) by Dr. John Hopson – a games researcher at Microsoft Game Studios.
- As mentioned earlier, MMORPGs **almost always require team play to advance**. A player starting a new game will initially be able accomplish goals by himself. However, before long significant advancement in the game requires that he join a group and accomplish goals together. The player will come to feel a connection to the team and feel responsible for advancing their goals. Therefore, the player will want to advance his character even more so that he can make a greater contribution to the team. In fact, if he does not keep up with his team he may not even be able to join in on certain quests or travel to parts of the world requiring a more advanced character. Finally, since many tasks can only be accomplished in a group, the player will be want to be online whenever his teammates are playing (which translates into more total hours online). The team component of MMORPGs is clearly a very important factor in encouraging longer and longer periods of play. If you remove the online component of these games, you remove a large portion of the appeal and many of the addictive components.
- The **virtual world continues to evolve even if the player is not online**. Therefore, if he is not playing and active in the developments of the world, he is potentially left behind when he rejoins. To avoid "missing" something he must play as much as possible and be online at every available opportunity.

- Companies **regularly release upgrades or expansion packs**. Even if players start to get bored of the online worlds their characters inhabit, expansion packs can always add new areas for exploration, new abilities to try, new tasks to complete, and new characters to develop.
- Top players or teams can **earn real world rewards** (e.g., tournaments for cash prizes). This can be extremely motivating and can encourage massive amounts of time to hone and develop skills (the equivalent of an athlete training for the Olympics). Some players also build up characters so that they can later be sold for profit. It takes little money to do this, but potentially hundreds of hours of game time – which is really not a great investment even from a purely financial perspective.
- MMORPGs **do not reward short and unscheduled periods of play**. The very structure of this type of video game is not "pick up and play". They require long-term commitments (months or years) of regular gaming sessions lasting at least an hour or more. They appeal to the hard core gamer who invests a significant portion of his free time to the experience. Due to the great investment (e.g., months developing a character) it becomes very hard to "throw away" all the work and walk away from the game. If a child is unable to do this on his own, the parent will be forced to intervene on his behalf – even though this will be a very unpopular decision with the child. A bit of a preview from the intervention sections later in this manual: Will your involvement require enforced moderation or a ban?
- Massively multiplayer online games **offer a more fully realized virtual world than other video game genres**. Players can create their own characters with attributes they may wish they had in real life. They form relationships, develop careers, and accomplish things that would be impossible (or require far more effort) in the real world. More than other games, MMORPGs offer an escape from the reality of the physical world and a retreat into a digital universe where players can assume any identity they desire.
- MMORPGs **typically require monthly fees**. In order to play, gamers must pay \$15 to \$20 per month even after the game has been purchased. Of course, the fact that there is a regular monthly charge encourages users to play so that they get their "money's worth".
- Compared to more linear and traditional video games, online role playing games **generate more varied and stronger emotions in players**. Because the world and the online experience is mostly user generated, gamers can experience wars, betrayal, friendship, romance, marriages, funerals, etc. The variety and intensity of emotions experienced online can be similar to emotions experienced in the real world, which is yet again, another very effective hook for excessive play. This also becomes a potential substitute for experiencing these emotions in the real world.

- **MMORPGs often operate on an “avoidance schedule”.** For games that are not played online, or online games that are not part of an evolving game world, when the player is not gaming there are no negative in-game consequences when he resumes. However as previously mentioned, the online universe of a MMO continues to evolve 24 hours per day – regardless of whether a particular player is active. If one is not gaming daily, his virtual world may have actually deteriorated due to a lack of attention and resource management. For example, in *Ultima Online*, a player’s residence will start to decay without regular visits. In *Farmville*, crops will rot if they are not attended to. Therefore, MMO gaming can be reinforced not only by rewards, but by avoiding punishment.
- **MMOs are designed to appeal to natural human instincts of gathering and hoarding.** We have all heard stories of harmless hobbies and collections that have turned into obsessions (for example, sports memorabilia collections needing multiple rooms for storage, Beanie Baby collections in the thousands, etc.). Just about anything that *can* be collected *is* being collected (for evidence, see a list of the [“25 strangest collections on the web”](#)). Even if we do not have massive collections of items, most people can identify with just how hard it can be to throw things out and purge ourselves of household clutter. This is a natural human tendency and one that is exploited in MMOs through “achievements” (small rewards for relatively mindless and often very repetitive tasks) and “grinding” (a MMO term used to describe completing an easy but repetitive task (sometimes for hours at a time) in order to level up. For a more detailed explanation of video game collection and hoarding click [here](#).
- **After players are invested in the game, major tasks and missions (“raids”) become much longer (sometimes requiring hours for a single mission).** Additionally, if the player quits during these missions all progress is typically lost. A similar technique is to place “save points” very far apart, thus requiring extended play sessions if one does not wish to lose progress. These techniques are designed to ensure that the motivation to continue playing once started is very strong.
- **Video games can (artificially) fill a void in an unfulfilling life.** In the book [“Outliers”](#) by Malcolm Gladwell, he writes that the three requirements for a satisfying job are autonomy (you have a say in what your day looks like), complexity (it should be intellectually stimulating), and there should be a clear connection between effort and reward (the harder you work, the greater the reward). If someone lacks autonomy, complexity, and rewards for effort in real life, he may turn to video games to fulfill these needs.

What are the *benefits / positive effects* of playing video games?

As with most hobbies, interests, or activities, moderate levels of involvement / engagement *can* have beneficial effects. For example, the phytochemicals in one glass of red wine per day have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease and slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease. Healthy levels of daily exercise will help a person manage their weight, prevent osteoporosis, and improve their mood. Healthy diets and nutrition management can prevent many of the health risks associated with being overweight such as type II diabetes, hypertension, and osteoarthritis.

Of course, just because a small or moderate amount of something has health benefits, does not mean that "more is even better". Any possible health benefits of wine will be lost if the person drinks to excess several times per week. Compulsive levels of exercise can lead to skeletal injuries, insomnia, depression, and amenorrhea. Obsessions with eating and dieting can lead to disorders such as bulimia and anorexia.

Clearly, moderation is the key in any activity if one hopes to benefit physically, cognitively, psychologically, or emotionally. The same is also true of video games. Now, keep in mind that treatment for an addiction will depend on what the addiction is and how well the person can control their use/habits so that they are in the healthy range. With alcoholism we are almost always looking at abstinence. With eating disorders we must look at healthier habits. And with video games...? This will depend on the individual, the game, the level of addiction, and multiple other factors. With video games it is not always clear if we should seek healthier habits or complete abstinence (much more on this in later sections).

Given that you have purchased this manual, it is very likely that any possible benefits of video games have been outweighed by the harmful consequences of the addiction. But, it is still important that you as a parent are educated and aware of some of the benefits of video games. Why? Because your child may have researched this topic (especially older children and teens) and will be ready with counter arguments on why he should continue playing and why you should change your mind on this issue. By learning about some of the benefits of video games, you will not be caught off guard by this information, can formulate your ideas and arguments in advance, will understand the underlying / less obvious appeal of the games, and may even be seen as knowledgeable by your child.

So, the goal in this section is certainly not to convince you that your child must play video games in order to be healthy and normal. Rather, you should simply be aware that there are some benefits associated with moderate play. But if your child is unable to demonstrate healthy levels of play, these benefits can certainly be obtained via other methods. By presenting this information, my goal is to hopefully insulate you against a child who selectively researches only the benefits of video games and hopes to convince you that no change is needed. *You* are the parent and *you* will decide when a behavior has become more harmful than beneficial.

The Possible Benefits of Playing Video Games in Moderation

- Can **increase self-esteem and self-confidence** as the player can accomplish things that would be impossible in real life. Players may get positive feedback and recognition from fellow players. This is especially rewarding for those who may receive few acknowledgements for their efforts and accomplishments in the real world.
Young, K. (1998). *Caught in the Net*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Can promote social interaction and provides a relatively safe environment for the player to **cooperate with others towards common goals**.
Squire, K. (2002). Cultural framing of computer/video games. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, July 2002.
- Can foster **better reading skills**, faster reaction times, and more efficient problem solving.
Delwiche, A. (2006). Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) in the new media classroom. *Educational Technology & Society*, 9, 160-172.
- Can refine cognitive skills, especially those of a **visual-spatial** nature.
Feng, J., Spence, I. & Pratt, J. (2007) Playing an action video game reduces gender differences in spatial cognition. *Psychological Science*, 18, 850-855.
- Can help the player relax and **temporarily escape stressful or difficult real-life problems**.
Shieh, K. & Cheng, M. (2007). An empirical study of experiential value and lifestyles and their effects on satisfaction in adolescents: An example using online gaming. *Adolescence*, 42, 199-215.
- Games that require more active physical interaction (for example, with motion-control input devices) can **enhance physical fitness**, motor skills, and motivation for physical activity.
Papastergiou, M. (2009). Exploring the potential of computer and video games for health and physical education: A literature review. *Computers and Education*, 53, 603-622.
- Video games may enhance **memory for visual information**.
Ferguson, C., Cruz, A., & Rueda, S. (2008). Gender, video game playing habits and visual memory tasks. *Sex Roles*, 58, 279-286.
- Violent video games **do not appear to increase the likelihood that players will become violent in the real world**.
Ferguson, C. (2007). The good, the bad and the ugly: A meta-analytic review of positive and negative effects of violent video games. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 78, 309-316.
- Video games can **increase the positive moods of children**.
Fleming, M., & Rickwood, D. (2001). Effects of violent versus nonviolent video games on children's arousal, aggressive mood, and positive mood. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 31, 2047-2071.

Is recovery possible? Will my child always have this problem?

Yes recovery is possible. If I did not believe this and did not have evidence that children and teens can recover from video game addiction I would not have written this manual. As is true for any addiction, recovery can be very difficult, slow-moving, and can *seem* impossible, but you do not need to accept that your child is destined to be addicted to video games. For some, it may require drastic measures to break the addiction, but based on both clinical research and my own practice with clients who are addicted to video games, *I know that recovery is possible.*

On numerous occasions I have worked with children and teens that have been compulsively playing video games for three or more years. In some cases these individuals were playing 50 hours or more per week (more than the equivalent of a full time job) and had been doing so for years. Not surprisingly, these kids were doing very poorly in school and some had even dropped out. Friends no longer called, and relationships with other family members were strained to say the least.

However, if a parent is committed to taking the necessary steps to help their child and enforcing healthy limits, there is no reason why the addiction should remain in the child's life. If there is a bright spot with regard to childhood video game addictions, it is that as a parent, ultimately you still have a great deal of influence and control over your child.

In contrast, consider adult video game addicts. These individuals must recognize that they are addicted, that it is unhealthy, and that they need to change – and then they must personally resist the urge to play. So, adults must not only accept the reality of the addiction, they must also develop enough self-control to resist the powerful urge to play. Both of these elements are *necessary* conditions for an adult who hopes to overcome video game addiction. In contrast, *neither* of these conditions are necessary for children. Because you are in control as a parent (or soon will be) these components are not necessary to eliminate video game addiction from a child's life...

Your child does not have to accept that he has a problem.

Your child does not have to want to change his habits.

Yes, it will make your task much easier if he gains insight into the problem and can practice self-control. But, if this does not happen, you have the power, the authority, and quite frankly, the responsibility to impose tight restrictions on gameplay or the complete removal of the problematic games.

Keep in mind though, that your power to intervene decreases with each passing day, month, and year. The influence you have over your child steadily declines with the passage of time as he gains independence, starts making his own decisions, and takes responsibility for his own choices. This is a natural and healthy part of development. As a parent you cannot (and should not) *require* your child to adopt your exact worldview,

your values, your behaviors, and your goals. You do however, want to encourage the values, beliefs, and behaviors that you believe are essential and that are required to find happiness as an adult and to eventually be a productive member of society. Although these values will certainly vary from person to person, they may include promoting honesty, integrity, respect, compassion, determination, dedication, hard work, resilience, self-care, and self-control. Once your child is an adult your job as a parent is definitely not over, but your influence is far less substantial and your control may be minimal.

Luckily, you are not in this position yet. If your child was an independent adult, your options would be quite limited. You could attempt to get him to see the damage he is causing to his life. You could refuse to enable his addiction by providing him with money, food, or shelter. You could encourage him to seek treatment. Ultimately though, the addiction would be *his* to address. You cannot afford to let the addiction persist until adulthood where your options will be very limited.

With the help of a loving and determined parent (and occasionally with some guidance from a psychologist or therapist), children and teens *can* overcome video game addiction. It may be impossible to completely avoid computers, but it is possible to live with them responsibly.

The game *can* be turned off for good.

Friendships *can* be restored.

Family relationships *can* be repaired.

Good grades *can* return.

Personal goals *can* become clear again.

Motivation to do other things *can* return.

Past hobbies and interests *can* be pursued again.

A future full of promise and potential *can* become a reality.

If you are worried about the long-term consequences of your child's current gaming addiction, acknowledge that the addiction may temporarily change the path he is on, but it rarely has the power to prevent him from returning to this path in the future... and certainly does not prevent him from choosing a different path to a similar or even better destination.

PART II:

Assess Your Situation



Assessment of Video Game Addiction In Children and Teens

Before any intervention can take place for a problem (whether the problem is physical, psychological, interpersonal, corporate, environmental, or *anything* really), a proper assessment of the situation must take place. A physician must make the correct diagnosis before prescribing medication or initiating surgery. A psychologist must accurately measure the intellectual and academic abilities of a child who is struggling in school before making recommendations to his parents and teachers. A city planner must assess transportation, health, safety, environmental, and housing needs before formulating a plan for development.

A parent who is preparing to intervene and help a child who is addicted to video games must determine the extent of the problem, the possible appeal of the game, the duration of the addiction, and numerous other factors. On the following pages, you will find various forms and questionnaires which will be helpful in assessing the nature of your child's addiction to video games.

Please do not move on to the later sections regarding specific interventions before you take the time to complete these assessment exercises. The tips and suggestions you choose to follow will be informed by your honest answers in this section.

Video Game Addictions in Children An Assessment Questionnaire for Parents

Instructions:

1. Please choose the best answer for each of the following questions.
2. Add the values in **bold** (and parenthesis) for each of your choices.
3. Review your results at the end of the questionnaire.

1) The type of game my child primarily plays is:

- a) MMORPG / MMO (e.g., World of Warcraft, Lineage, Runescape, Everquest) **(3)**

or:

Real Time Strategy (e.g., Company of Heroes, Age of Empires, Command & Conquer, Warhammer, Clash of Clans) **(3)**

or:

“Sandbox” Game (e.g., Minecraft) **(3)**

- b) First Person Shooter (e.g., Team Fortress, Halo, Killzone, Unreal Tournament, Call of Duty) **(2)**

or:

Action (e.g., Grand Theft Auto, Devil May Cry, Metal Gear Solid, Uncharted, Fallout, Assassin's Creed) **(2)**

- c) Sports (e.g., Madden NFL, NHL, FIFA Soccer, NBA Street, Fight Night) **(1)**

or

Fighter (e.g., Tekken, Street Fighter, Soulcalibur, Mortal Kombat, Dead or Alive, Virtua Fighter) **(1)**

or

- d) Music (e.g., Guitar Hero, Rock Band) **(1)**

or

Racing (e.g., Forza Motorsport, Need for Speed, Burnout, Gran Turismo) **(1)**

e) Puzzle (e.g., Bejeweled, Peggle, Plants vs Zombies, Candy Crush) **(0)**

or

Platformer (e.g., Super Mario, MegaMan, LittleBigPlanet, Ratchet & Clank) **(0)**

2) On an average *weekday*, my child plays video games for:

- a) 0 – 1 hour. **(0)**
- b) 2 hours. **(1)**
- c) 3 hours. **(2)**
- d) 4 hours. **(3)**
- e) 5 or more hours. **(4)**

3) On an average day on the weekend, my child plays video games for:

- a) 0 – 1 hour. **(0)**
- b) 2 hours. **(1)**
- c) 3 - 4 hours. **(2)**
- d) 5 – 6 hours. **(3)**
- e) 7 or more hours. **(4)**

4) I have *unsuccessfully* tried to reduce the amount of time my child plays video games:

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) One time. **(1)**
- c) Two times. **(1)**
- d) Three times. **(2)**
- e) Four or more times. **(3)**

5) If I did not set limits on video game time, my child would play:

- a) About the same amount as he / she does now. **(0)**
- b) Somewhat more than he / she does now. **(1)**
- c) Significantly more than he / she does now. **(2)**
- d) Far more than he / she does now. **(2)**

6) My child has access to video games in his / her room:

- a) Yes. **(2)**
- b) No. **(0)**

7) My child stays up late to play video games and as a result, is tired the next morning:

- a) Never or rarely. **(0)**
- b) Occasionally. **(1)**
- c) Frequently. **(2)**
- d) Almost always. **(3)**

8) My child is permitted to play video games before homework is completed:

- a) Never or rarely. **(-1)**
- b) Occasionally. **(0)**
- c) Frequently. **(1)**
- d) Almost always. **(2)**

9) My child would prefer to play video games by him/herself rather than go out with friends:

- a) Never or rarely. **(0)**
- b) Occasionally. **(1)**
- c) Frequently. **(2)**
- d) Always. **(3)**

10) My child seems to have few friends outside of the gaming world:

- a) Not at all true. **(0)**
- b) Somewhat true. **(1.5)**
- c) Definitely true. **(3)**

11) My child's grades have suffered as a result of playing video games:

- a) Not at all true. **(0)**
- b) Somewhat true. **(1.5)**
- c) Definitely true. **(3)**

12) My child lies about how much time he / she spends playing video games:

- a) Not at all true. **(0)**
- b) Probably true. **(1)**
- c) Definitely true. **(2)**

13) My child is an active member in formal school activities or clubs:

- a) No, none at all. **(2)**
- b) Yes, one activity or club. **(0)**
- c) Yes, two activities or clubs. **(-1)**
- d) Yes, three or more activities or clubs. **(-2)**

14) My child has interests outside the world of video games:

- a) No, none at all. **(3)**
- b) Yes, one other significant interest. **(1)**
- c) Yes, two other significant interests. **(-1)**
- d) Yes, three or more significant interests. **(-2)**

15) My child neglects his / her hygiene because of excessive video game play:

- a) Never or rarely. **(0)**
- b) Occasionally. **(1)**
- c) Often. **(2)**
- d) Always. **(3)**

16) My child spends his/her own money buying video games or subscribing to online gaming services:

- a) Never – He / she does not spend money on gaming. **(0)**
- b) Rarely – He / she spends only a small portion of his / her money on games. **(0)**
- c) Often – He / she spends a significant portion of his / her money on games. **(1.5)**
- d) Always – He / she spends every cent of his / her money on video games. **(3)**

17) My child currently has a part-time job:

- a) No, he / she is too young to work, or I prefer that he / she does not work. **(0)**
- b) No, he / she is too involved in other activities (not including video games). **(-1)**
- c) No, I would like him / her to work but he / she refuses to do so. **(2)**
- d) Yes, but he / she has difficulty holding onto jobs. **(2)**
- e) Yes, and he / she successfully holds onto jobs. **(-2)**

18) Other family members are concerned about how much my child plays video games:

- a) No. Other know how much he / she plays but they are not worried about it. **(-1)**
- b) No. Others do not know how much he / she plays. **(0)**
- c) Yes, other family members are concerned about how much my child spends gaming. **(2)**

19) My child becomes irritable or anxious when he / she cannot access his / her favorite video game (for example, when the computer is not working):

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Rarely. **(0.5)**
- c) Often. **(2)**
- d) Always. **(3)**

20) When not playing his / her favorite game, my child spends time reading about it or discussing it online with other players:

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Rarely. **(0)**
- c) Occasionally. **(1)**
- d) Often. **(2)**

21) My child becomes very angry or defensive when I ask him / her about his / her gaming habits:

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Yes, occasionally. **(1)**
- c) Yes, often. **(2)**
- d) Yes, almost always. **(2)**

22) As a parent, I decide which games my child is permitted to play:

- a) Yes, always. **(-1)**
- b) Usually. I screen most games and do not allow certain games into the house. **(0)**
- c) Rarely. My child generally chooses which games he / she buys or installs. **(2)**
- d) Never. My child buys and installs any game he / she wants to. **(2)**

23) My child makes arrangements to play online when his / her friends, team, guild, or clan will also be playing – even if this is at odd or inconvenient hours:

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Rarely. **(1)**
- c) Sometimes. **(2)**
- d) Often. **(3)**

24) My child would have difficulty giving up all video games for one week:

- a) No, not at all. This would be very easy for my child. **(-2)**
- b) My child wouldn't like it, but he / she could do it without too many complaints. **(1)**
- c) My child would have great difficulty giving up video games for one week. **(2)**
- d) It would be virtually impossible for my child to give up video games for one week. **(3)**

25) My child eats meals while playing video games:

- a) Never, just a snack now and then. **(0)**
- b) Sometimes. **(1)**
- c) Often. **(2)**
- d) Always. **(3)**

26) My child admits that he / she plays video games too much:

- a) No. **(0)**
- b) Yes. **(3)**

27) My child gets headaches, red eyes, sore fingers, or wrist pains from playing video games:

- a) Never or very rarely. **(0)**
- b) Sometimes. **(1)**
- c) Often. **(2)**

28) My child plays video games at the first available opportunity (for example, as soon as arriving home from school, immediately after dinner, etc.):

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Rarely. **(0)**
- c) Sometimes. **(1)**
- d) Often. **(2)**

29) My child has had gaming sessions that lasted 7 or more hours nonstop:

- a) Never. **(0)**
- b) Rarely. **(2)**
- c) Sometimes. **(3)**
- d) Often. **(4)**

30) My child does well academically in school:

- a) Never. **(2)**
- b) Rarely. **(1)**
- c) Usually. **(-1)**
- d) Always. **(-2)**

Interpretation of your score:

0 – 20 points

Likelihood of Video Game Addiction: LOW

Based on your answers, it does not appear that your child is addicted to video games or has a problem with excessive gaming. Keep in mind that playing video games is now very common for both children and teens. It is still possible that your child occasionally plays for too long or neglects other responsibilities in favor of gaming – as long as this is not happening often it is probably nothing to be too concerned about. It is likely that your child plays video games as a way of relaxing, socializing with friends, or for simple entertainment, and that his or her play does not often interfere with other more important activities. The limits and structure you have provided for your child appear to be working – keep it up!

21 – 40 points**Likelihood of Video Game Addiction: MODERATE**

Based on your answers, it is possible that your child is developing problematic video gaming habits. While he or she may not yet be “addicted” you have probably noticed that some areas in his or her life are starting to be affected by excessive play. For example, you may have noticed that your child’s school grades have slipped, that he / she has an erratic sleeping schedule due to gaming, and that he / she has lost interest in formerly enjoyable activities. At this point you are in a prime position to step in and make the changes necessary to prevent your child’s excessive gaming habits from becoming an addiction. As a parent it is important to set clear boundaries, limits, and expectations for your child...and rules for video games are no exception.

41 – 60 points**Likelihood of Video Game Addiction: HIGH**

Based on your answers, it is likely that your child is currently exhibiting many symptoms of video game addiction and that excessive video game play has affected multiple areas of his or her life. For example, it is likely that school grades have suffered, that your child seems disconnected from the family, and that he or she has lost interest in most activities other than gaming. If you have encouraged your child to cut back on his or her playing time this was likely met with resistance, defensiveness, or anger. Remember that you are still the parent and as such, must impose limits on your child that he or she will not like or understand at the time. If you feel that could benefit from some help in setting and enforcing these limits (in addition to the help provided by this workbook), it may be useful to book a consultation with a psychologist or counsellor in your area.

61 – 80 points**Likelihood of Video Game Addiction: VERY HIGH**

Based on your answers, it is very likely that your child is addicted to video games and that this is negatively affecting numerous areas of his life. At this point it is likely that video games (probably MMORPG, real time strategy, or first person shooters) are the center of his or her world and that few (if any) other activities are of interest. He or she probably shows little or no interest in schoolwork, despite an almost certain deterioration in grades. In extreme cases, he or she may no longer be attending school. Your child probably plays video games until very late at night and may be sleeping during the day. Attempts to get him or her to cut back have probably been unsuccessful and met with considerable defensiveness or anger. It is important to consider the possibility that your child’s video game addiction is not only a problem in and of itself, but also co-exists with another psychological or emotional problem (such as depression). Given the extent of the problem based on your answers, it is clear that action must be taken. If you do not feel capable of dealing with this situation entirely by yourself, you may find it helpful to book a consultation with a psychologist or counsellor in your area.

Keep Track of Gameplay for One Week

What was the result of the questionnaire above? Did it fit with your previous evaluation of your child's gaming habits? In addition to an assessment questionnaire, it can be very helpful to actually document exactly when and how much your child plays video games. An accurate and representative record of typical gaming can be useful in later sections when you will be required to set reasonable gaming limits and decide on interventions that are appropriate for your situation.

Use the form on the next page to document your child's gaming habits for one week. This should be a "typical" week of play prior to introducing new rules, interventions, or limitations. Use the form to record all gaming that you directly observe or that you are very confident is happening. For example, if your child only plays on a family computer while you are home, this record keeping assignment will be quite easy to complete. However, if your child has a computer or console in his room (more on this in later sections) you may have to provide a reasonable estimate of gaming hours. Likewise, if your child is home by himself (which may be the case if he is in his teens), you may have to estimate how much he plays based on previous knowledge of his gaming habits. Unless your child is very young and has no access to video games without your knowledge, the form will be a rough estimate of his habits. This is just fine – it can still be used as an assessment tool and when planning interventions in later sections.

One Week Gaming Record

MONDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

TUESDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

WEDNESDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

THURSDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

FRIDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

SATURDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

SUNDAY

Time of Day	Game	Number of Hours
		TOTAL =

1) Total Weekly Gaming Hours: _____

2) Most Common Time for Excessive Play: _____

3) Complete the sentence:

- The total weekly gaming hours is most likely...
- A) an accurate estimate of my child's gaming time
 - B) an underestimate of my child's gaming time
 - C) an overestimate of my child's gaming time

4) If you believe that the number above is an underestimate or overestimate of your child's gaming habits, please explain why:

5) If you believe that the number above is not reflective of your child's typical gaming habits, please provide a more accurate estimate: _____

A Closer Look at the Game and the Addiction

When dealing with child or teen video game addiction, parents sometimes find it easier to take the necessary steps (especially the more difficult steps) with a slight reframing of the problem.

Please use the spaces below to get to know your adversaries – the game and the addiction, not your child. Your child is not the enemy. He is the one that you love, the one that you have sacrificed for, and the one that you will not let succumb to this addiction.

The addiction (and to a lesser extent, the game itself) will not go without a fight. It has a hold on your child and has no plans of letting go simply because you asked it to. It will quickly identify you as the enemy and will be extremely resourceful in devising offensive and defensive strategies to defeat you:

- It may try to convince you that it is normal and healthy (“*Everyone* plays this!”)
- It may attempt to gain your trust (no longer playing out in the open but secretly playing at night).
- It may attempt to downplay its impact (“At least I’m not using drugs.”)
- It may try to use your emotions against you (“You don’t love me.”)
- It may try to turn you and your partner against each other (“*Dad* lets me play.”)
- It may tell your child that life is pointless without it (“Nothing else makes me happy.”)
- It may attempt to make you feel guilty (“Maybe if you didn’t nag so often I wouldn’t play this much.”)
- It may try to make you feel sorry for it (“These are my only friends.”)
- It may ask to be ignored (“Don’t worry about me, just leave me alone.”)
- When more subtle strategies have failed, it may attack verbally and in some cases, physically (“F___ you. You can’t tell me what to do.”)

When the addiction knows that you are attempting to eliminate it, its goal is to weaken you to the point where you say “I give up...this just isn’t worth it anymore.”

Not this time. This time you know your enemy and will be ready...

Game & Addiction Overview

My child's game of choice is called: _____

The genre of game is: _____

The system he plays on is: _____

He has been playing this game for: _____ years _____ months

He plays online against others: _____ Yes _____ No

On an average weekday he plays for: _____ hours

On an average weekend he plays for: _____ hours

Three things I think he likes about this game are: 1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Based on what I now know about 1. _____

the reasons for video game 2. _____

addiction (page 32), my child 3. _____

may be most susceptible to:

Finish the sentence: _____

"Before he started playing this game, my child was..." _____

Finish the sentence: _____

"Now that he is addicted to this game, my child is..." _____

The Impact of Video Game Addiction on the Child and on the Family

Denying the consequences (especially the long-term consequences) of an addiction is something that can maintain self-destructive behavior. As an extreme example, very few people would take up smoking if it caused cancer and killed you within one week. However, because it takes years to see the life-threatening effects of smoking it is much easier to deny just how harmful the habit is. Similarly, if playing World of Warcraft or Minecraft took only one week to drop your child's grades from Bs to Ds, caused him to lose contact with his real world friends, resulted in anger and disappointment from his family, and forced him to give up all other enjoyable activities, it is very unlikely that he would become addicted.

Below, list the ways in which your child's video game addiction has negatively impacted his life (e.g., poor sleep habits, lack of exercise, lost friendships, poor school performance, family conflict, etc). Also, list the impact on the family as a whole.

How my Child has been Affected by Video Games

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

How my Family has been Affected by Video Games

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

Finding Patterns in Gaming Habits

One of the intervention strategies that will later be reviewed (see page 169) involves changing your child's typical patterns of video game play. Of course for this to be effective, you must first identify when gaming usually happens, the events that often precede it, where it happens, who is involved, etc.

Use the space below to identify common patterns, themes, and conditions with regard to your child's gaming habits.

The daily events that usually precede my child's gaming (e.g., arriving home from school, after dinner, etc.) are:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

The locations (e.g., in his room, recreation room, etc.) where my child usually plays games are:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

The time of day (e.g., morning, afternoon, evening, late night) that my child usually plays video games is:

- 1) _____

Gamer Math

Note: You will need a calculator for this section.

On the worksheet on page 56, you estimated how many hours per day your child spends playing one particular video game. Now, think about how many total hours he spends playing all video games during an average *weekday* and write that number here: A =

Multiply this number by 5 and write the value here: B =

Estimate the total number of hours he spends playing video games on an average *weekend* and write that number here: C =

Multiply this number by 2 and write the value here: D =

E = C + D: (Average hours of gaming time per week)

If your child continues his gaming habits at the present rate:

In *one month* he will spend _____ (E X 4) hours gaming.
This is the equivalent of _____ (value above / 16) waking days.

In *one year* he will spend _____ (E X 52) hours gaming.
This is the equivalent of _____ (value above / 16) waking days.

In *5 years* he will spend _____ (E X 260) hours gaming.
This is the equivalent of _____ (value above / 16) waking days.

In *10 years* he will spend _____ (E X 520) hours online or gaming.
This is the equivalent of _____ (value above / 16) waking days.

You have calculated that at his current level of play, your child will spend the equivalent of _____ days playing video games over the next 5 years, and _____ days playing video games over the next 10 years.

Please do not dismiss these numbers. Parents occasionally assume that their child's habits will lessen with time – even without intervention on their part. Yes, this can happen, but the opposite can also occur. That is, as he gets older and gains more independence and a stronger will (for example as he enters high school or university), he may actually play *even more* than he does now. The purpose of this exercise is to extrapolate his current gaming habits into the future and put his playing time into perspective. This *is* the road he is now on, but he can change direction with your help.

Note: Complete this page after you have finished the exercise on page 64. On page 64 you described your hopes and dreams for your child 10 years into the future. Now, think about the numbers you calculated in the Gamer Math section above. Describe how his path will be different if this addiction remains out of control. Now what is he doing? What opportunities may now be closed to him? What does his life look like?

Please describe your thoughts and feelings on the differences between the hopes you have for your child (page 64) and the path he is currently on (page 60).

PART III:

Prepare for Action



Why You are About to Fight this Addiction

You are preparing to intervene on behalf of your child because you can no longer allow this addiction to control his life and hurt your family. When your child first started playing video games you probably assumed that this was harmless fun that would just be an enjoyable activity for your child. After all, most children and teens do play video games in some capacity. But, this did not turn out to be true for your child. You were caught by surprise by how quickly your child retreated into the virtual world. You watched as he became less and less engaged with his friends and family. You started to worry as his grades no longer reflected his ability, but rather, the extent of his addiction. Looking back on how the addiction gained access into your home and took over your child, you may be feeling guilty, angry, embarrassed, lost, stressed, and / or depressed by the perceived hopelessness of the situation. You are concerned that if something is not done *now* the problem will become even worse and your child and your family will suffer. You fear that your child does not recognize the seriousness of this problem and are very worried that his future will be permanently compromised by the damage this addiction is now causing. You refuse to let this happen. You have tried in the past to eliminate this destructive presence from your home, but unfortunately, this was unsuccessful. Letting the addiction have control over your child is no longer an option. It has to end here. You are prepared to seriously fight the addiction and win the war this time. You are prepared to take steps that will be very difficult (see Part V on banning and going “cold turkey”) if it means that your child is no longer held captive by video games.

A World Without Video Games

For a moment, forget that video games exist. Close your eyes (when you have finished reading this paragraph of course) and focus on an image of your child smiling. Think about the way you felt when he was born. Try to visualize his first steps...his first birthday...his first day at school...or some other important milestone...

Focus on the images you see, the sounds you hear, the people at these events, and the pride that you felt.

Open your eyes.

In the space below, take a moment to write about this pride:

Now, imagine that your child is 10 years older than his current age. He is now an adult (or at least an older adolescent). What do you hope will be happening for him? What is he excited about? Describe his goals and the life path he is hopefully on (again, in a world without video games).

Note: You can now return to and complete the exercise on page 60.

Past Interventions

Using this workbook is probably not your first attempt at breaking your child's video game addiction. In the past, you may have tried to encourage moderation and enforce a ban, yet excessive gaming remains a significant problem in your child's life.

Think back to past attempts you made to help your child. What did you try that appeared to be helpful (even if only for a short period of time)? Why do you think this was helpful?

Intervention Strategy	Why was it helpful?

Take some time to review the intervention strategies that showed promise (page 65) and those that were unsuccessful (page 66). Can you find any common themes or patterns in the strategies that were somewhat successful? Likewise, do you see any commonalities in the interventions that were unsuccessful?

For the strategies that were somewhat successful, I notice that...

For the strategies that were unsuccessful, I notice that...

As you proceed through this workbook and begin to implement new strategies, make sure to keep this section in mind. Although I will be presenting dozens of techniques, strategies, and thoughts on helping your child overcome video game addiction, the nature of a self-help manual means that it cannot possibly be perfectly tailored to any one individual child. No one knows your child like you do and as such, you should have some sense of what will and will not work. If you have had some success with previous strategies (even if they were not 100% successful) please do not hesitate to include them as part of your overall intervention plan (perhaps with slight modifications or a renewed commitment to enforcing new rules, expectations, or conditions).

Previous strategies I may try again:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Anticipated Challenges and Responses

As I have alluded to several times already, when preparing to help a child or teen who is addicted to video games, you should expect the process to be difficult, frustrating, stressful, and one that will test your patience and determination.

Although it is impossible to predict exactly how difficult this process will be and how the addiction will fight back, it is worth considering the challenges that may arise. Based on past attempts to help your child, you may already anticipate some of the situations and reactions from your child that will be most difficult to deal with.

In the section below, list the challenges you anticipate in your attempts to significantly reduce (or if necessary, completely eliminate) your child's video game time. Try to imagine the things he will say, what he will do, how others will react, the methods he will use to continue playing, whether he will try to get others to align with him, etc. Then, comment on how you could respond to these challenges (for example, specific messages you will tell yourself, help you will get from others, responses to his behaviors, etc.). There will be much more on specific strategies and tips in later sections, but for now, just use this brainstorming exercise to anticipate his reactions and your possible responses.

Anticipated Challenge	Possible Responses

Anticipated Challenge	Possible Responses

Do Not Wait Until the Game is “Finished” Before Taking action

As you prepare to address your child’s video game addiction, you may be tempted to let him “finish” the game(s) he is currently playing before starting your intervention. I do not believe this is necessary, mostly because (as previously discussed) there *is* no end to many of the most addictive games (MMO, Sandbox, RTS, and FPS genres). The concept of an “end” normally only applies to a single player game. For online multiplayer games, the greatest appeal is not in completing solitary missions. Rather, the attraction is the experience of developing skills, forming alliances with others, and competing against other players. For example, most online FPS games have dozens of ways to modify the battles and tweak the settings so that the experience does not get stale. Add the fact that players are competing against other humans and not computer-controlled characters, and it is possible to play the same game for years without becoming bored with the experience.

What about MMOs like World of Warcraft? Although these games normally have an upper limit on leveling (at least until the next expansion pack is released), this does not end the game. For example it may not be possible to advance past level 80, but there will always be other tasks to complete, other ways to help one’s teammates advance, and upgrades to buy for your character. This stage is sometimes referred to as an “endgame”, and for some players it can be even more addictive and time-consuming than the leveling up stage. It is at the endgame that players will be able to access the very best gear, weapons, and “extras” for their characters. Of course, at this point it takes an enormous amount of time to obtain rewards (one of my clients estimated that he spent six hours to obtain a simple shield upgrade for his character).

The point is that for a video game addict, there is no end. Games can be played for months or years without ever having the same experience twice. And if he does happen to become bored with the game, there are plenty of new games waiting to become the latest obsession. In most cases there is little value in waiting to address the problem of excessive gaming – prepare to take action now.

My Contract



**My child is addicted to video games.
This is a real addiction.**

**As his parent, I am responsible for his health and wellness.
I must take action now.**

“I am committed to making the necessary changes to my child’s gaming habits. Although he enjoys playing video games, I recognize that the extent of his gaming is very unhealthy and that he has lost control. I need to help him regain control over his gaming habits – even if it means the complete removal of all games from my home. Even at this young age, it is important that he can make the most out of the opportunities that are presented to him - and he can only do this if he decreases the time that he plays video games. For some things in life, he will not receive a second chance to succeed - I will not have his options in life limited by video games. If I fail to take action and stick to it, I may always regret it.

I do not wish to live a life of regret and I am absolutely committed to resolving this issue *now*.”

Signed: _____

Date: _____

PART IV:

**Strategies, Tips, & Thoughts
For *Moderation***



A Word on Moderation

In designing this manual, I have divided the intervention sections into two distinct parts: Tips, strategies, and thoughts pertaining to moderation, and those regarding banning (the complete removal of the addictive game or games from your child's life).

As you might imagine, there is some overlap between these two sections. For example, investing in techno-fixes (see page 103) is found in the section on moderation, but using programs and applications to control or limit access can also be very helpful for a parent that has decided to completely pull the plug (so to speak) on video games. In general, you will find numerous tips and strategies in the moderation section that will be helpful if you decide to enforce a ban. However, I also believe that banning interventions are unique and important enough to deserve their own section.

If you are like most parents with a child who is addicted to video games, you will likely attempt to encourage / enforce moderation habits before completely eliminating video games from your child's life. This is quite normal – most parents would prefer to compromise with their child if this results in acceptable play habits, rather than ban all video game access immediately. After all, it is a good idea to allow your child the opportunity to prove that he can moderate his habits and demonstrate self-control.

Depending on the extent of the addiction, the specific game, the interventions you decide to use, your commitment to enforcing limits, and of course, the personality characteristics of your particular child, you *may* discover that moderation is possible and that your child can handle limited access to his favorite games with your help.

However, many parents (but certainly not all) discover that despite their best attempts to encourage healthy limits, their child is unable to play in moderation. These parents are faced with almost relentless pleas for more gaming time, repeated attempts to bend or break the rules for play, a general disregard for the limits set by parents, and gaming that continues to be excessive. Parents in these situations often feel like they have “tried everything” and are extremely frustrated by the constant battles to encourage moderation. At this point, some form of ban may be necessary (much more on this in Section V).

For now though, let's take a look at the tips, strategies, thoughts, and suggestions for encouraging moderation. I recommend that you take the time to read through the entire section once and check ✓ the strategies that you would at least *consider* adopting. Then, read through these points again and use the treatment worksheet on page 220 to design your first intervention strategy. Keep in mind that this strategy will almost certainly change as you learn what works and what does not. Having to change or modify your strategies as the intervention proceeds is very normal. There is rarely a single solution to this problem, but with the help of this manual, your time, energy, resourcefulness, and most of all, your determination to enforce limits despite strong resistance can bring back the child you know is still there.

The Wants vs. Needs Technique

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Although the tips, advice, and thoughts in this section are generally presented in no particular order (as it is difficult to know which strategy will be most effective for *your* child), you may notice that I have already ticked point #1. In my view this is one of two items that should definitely be on your “worth trying” list. This approach will provide the overall structure and self-discipline that many other interventions require in order to be effective. It is also worth adding that the approach should not only be helpful for dealing with video game addiction, but for many other difficult situations in which child behaviors do not match parental wishes. If you are not already following a similar strategy, be forewarned that it will feel uncomfortable at first – perhaps almost robotic and artificial. This is quite normal. With time and practice however, it will become much more natural and should encourage behaviors that are far more consistent with your requests. Also, do not be surprised if your child does not respond positively to your requests at first. Depending on how consequences for disobedience were enforced in the past he may have learned that complying with your requests is optional. Again, this is also very normal. Only by *consistently* following the techniques described below will your child realize that your words and promises should be taken seriously and that your promises *will* be enforced. Finally, this approach will *not* work if only one parent in a two-parent household is practicing it. As is true of most parenting techniques, *both* parents must be on the same page and enforcing the same rules (see more on parental agendas on page 133).

Three Critical Components of Effective Parenting

Looking at page 66, it is very possible that you have tried strategies that could have been successful with a few minor tweaks or modifications. One of the most common mistakes parents make is to give up too early on a strategy – either because it doesn’t work right away or because the addiction does its best to make your life as miserable as possible. I cannot stress enough just how important it is to:

- A) Give an intervention time to succeed.
- B) *Never* make threats that you are not prepared to follow through on.
- C) *Always* enforce pre-determined consequences if rules are not followed.

Even beyond the problem of video game addiction, I believe that the guidelines above are *necessary* (but not sufficient of course) components of effective parenting. Your child will benefit from predictable and firm (authoritative, not authoritarian) parenting. What this means is that your primary goal as a parent is not to be your child's friend, but his guide, his mentor, his support, his teacher, his disciplinarian when necessary, and his protector...even if this means protecting him from himself.

Let me restate these points again.

To have control as a parent, you *must*:

- A) Give an intervention time to succeed.
- B) *Never* make threats that you are not prepared to follow through on.
- C) *Always* enforce pre-determined consequences if rules are not followed.

Distinguishing Between Wants and Needs

I will be completely honest here. If you are not prepared to follow the points above, your options for helping your child overcome this addiction (and other challenges he may face) will be extremely limited. Furthermore, if you do not *consistently* back up your words with actions, it will be very difficult to ever gain the respect of your child.

I am by no means suggesting that you become a tyrant – holding unreasonable expectations, enforcing harsh punishments, and demanding complete obedience from your child!

However, if for example, you tell you child that he *needs* to complete his homework before watching TV, there should be *no exceptions*. It doesn't matter if his favorite show is on in 30 minutes. It doesn't matter if he has already spent an hour working on the homework...

If you say it...you *must* mean it.

Every. Single. Time.

So, if you are not already doing so with your child, you must ask yourself a very important question before every request to your child:

“Is this a want or a need?”

Parents will often make a point to teach their children the difference between “wants” and “needs”. For example, it is important for a child to learn very early on that food, shelter, clothing, and safety are needs, but that toys are wants. But, with regard to requesting something from a child, it is equally important for *parents* to understand the difference between wants and needs.

Parental Want: Something that you would like your child to do (or not do), but it is not of critical importance and you have some degree of flexibility as to whether he complies right away (or at all). You would be willing to reconsider this request based on his opinion, wishes, or other information.

Parental Need: Something that your child *must* do (or not do), and for which there will be predetermined consequences if he does not comply.

Whether something is a want or a need will depend on you, your child, and the particular situation you are in. As a general guideline, the *majority of your communications with your child will be wants, not needs*. Sometimes parents feel so out of control that every interaction with their child seems like a fight to win or lose. At this point, everything can feel like a need.

It isn't.

Some battles with your child are worth fighting, but many are not. Eating all of his dinner is probably a want and may not be worth turning into a battle. Cleaning his room before going out with friends may be a want or a need – it depends on how important this is to you and whether you are committed to enforcing predetermined consequences if he does not follow your directions.

Making the distinction between needs and wants does not mean that you only express your needs (parents are allowed to have wants just the same as children do). But, it does require that you *communicate* these requests in different ways.

Communicating Wants and Needs with Precision

If you are not ready to enforce a need, do not say it.

If you are not ready, willing, or able to set and enforce consequences for non-compliance to a need, do not communicate this need to your child. Telling your child that something *needs* to happen, but having no consequences if it doesn't, sends the message that your words can be ignored and that your child can disobey you at will.

Changing your child's video game habits is a need, but if you are not 100% committed to enforcing specific predetermined consequences for non-compliance, there is no point in trying to enforce limits. In fact, this will actually be harmful. Every time you set limits or conditions and do not enforce them, the addiction tightens its hold on your child. Note that there have been many books written on the importance of consistency when parenting. You may find a book such as [8 Weeks to a Well-Behaved Child: A Failsafe Program for Toddlers Through Teens](#) helpful for more on this issue.

After you have determined whether your particular request is a want or a need, you must communicate this with precision. This may seem like a small point, but the subtleties in the language you use when asking your child to do something are quite important.

Consider the previous example of a child cleaning his room before going out with friends.

If you have decided that this is a *want*, you may say:

“Can you clean your room before going out with your friends?”

“I would prefer that you clean your room before going out with friends.”

“It would be great if you would clean your room before going out with friends.”

If you have decided that this is a *need*, you may say:

“I need you to clean your room before going out with friends.”

“If you want to go out with friends, you need to clean your room first.”

“You must clean your room before going out with friends.”

You should notice quite a difference in how wants and needs are expressed when making a request of a child. For wants, you are *asking* the child to do something that you are willing to compromise on if appropriate. For needs, you are *telling* the child to do something that you cannot compromise on.

I know what you may now be thinking:

“Want if my child does not comply with my expressed need?”

Here is the critical point:

If your child does not comply, he must be made aware of the specific consequences... and you are absolutely *committed* to enforcing them.

Let’s return to video game use and look at an example of a parent requesting that her child stop playing and get ready for bed. She has identified this as a need that will have consequences if he does not comply.

Mother: “Just a heads-up that you have five more minutes to play and then **I need you** to get ready for bed.”

Son: (silence)

Mother: “Did you hear me? You have five more minutes and then **I need you to** get ready for bed.”

Son: (silence)

Mother moves and stands directly in between her son and the TV on which he is playing.

Mother: “Pause the game.”

Son: “What?”

Mother: “You have five more minutes and then **I need you to** get ready for bed.”

Son: “OK.”

Mother moves away and the son continues to play.

Mother: “You have one minute – save your game now.”

Son: (silence)

One minute later.

Mother: “OK, that’s five minutes. Time to get ready for bed.”

Son: “Just a few more minutes...”

Mother moves and stands directly in between her son and the TV. She gets down to his eye level.

Mother: “We talked about what would happen if you didn’t quit after five minutes. Turn the game off *right now* or you will lose all privileges for the next week.”

Son: “Fine”. (angrily)

A few important points to note from this exchange:

- The mother gives her child a five minute and a one minute warning before the end of the gaming session. This is a good habit to get into because kids (and adults) often lose track of time when playing.
- The mother uses the term “I need” to convey to her child that this request is not negotiable. As you continue to use this language, your child will come to learn that the request must either be followed or specific, predetermined punishments will result.
- The mother persists until she is sure she has the attention of her child and he has acknowledged her. Sometimes this requires physically placing yourself between the child and the game.
- The mother reminds her child when there is one minute left and gives him an opportunity to save the game.
- Since this was defined and phrased in the form of a need, the mother does not debate his request for extra time.
- The mother reminds her son about what will happen (discussed *before* he started the game) if he does not stop playing. This is his *last* opportunity to avoid punishment.

OK, this particular scenario played out quite nicely. However, if you have not consistently enforced predetermined consequences / punishments, it is unlikely that your child will be as compliant as the child in this scenario. If your promised behaviors have not consistently matched your words, your child will probably not take threats to *now* enforce punishments seriously. It is more likely that your child will respond in a manner similar to the following examples below. So, what should happen if the child is less...agreeable? Let’s look at a slightly different exchange:

Mother: “OK, that’s five minutes. Time to get ready for bed.”

Son: “Just a few more minutes...”

Mother moves and stands directly in between her son and the TV. She gets down to his eye level.

Mother: “We talked about what would happen if you didn’t quit after five minutes. Turn the game off *right now* or you will lose all privileges for the next week.”

Son: “Whatever.”

Son continues playing.

Mother: “OK, I need to turn of the game then.”

Mother moves in and turns off the game (or unplugs the power).

Mother: “You know that you are still punished. There will be no games until next week.

Son swears at her and goes to his room.

Points to note:

- Mother backs up her request with action. Once a need is framed in this way to your child, it is essential that he complies. If not, you must enforce the predetermined consequences. Once the need is expressed, you are committed to following through with necessary actions.
- Mother warns child before she turns off the game.
- Mother *still* follows through with the punishment even though the game is now off. What is essential is that the *child* complies with the request. This did not happen, so the punishment must remain. Does this seem harsh? It shouldn’t. It may take many of these types of interactions before your child understands that you mean what you say and that your words are to be taken seriously.
- If you are afraid that your child will become physically violent if you turn off the game, *do not put yourself in danger* by unplugging or turning off the game. Call for additional support if it is available. If it isn’t, you may introduce further punishment for continued non-compliance. Also, if you are worried about or have been the victim of physical violence from your child, you should look into getting additional help from a professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, or counsellor). Physical violence in response to video game limitations may indicate that your child has serious emotional or behavioral problems in addition to the addiction (see more on this on page 122). Anyway, let’s assume that the mother has some concerns about stepping in and physically turning off the game herself.

What could she do if no one else is available but feels safe enough to not back down completely?

Mother: "OK, that's five minutes. Time to get ready for bed."

Son: "Just a few more minutes..."

Mother moves and stands directly in between her son and the TV. She gets down to his eye level.

Mother: "We talked about what would happen if you didn't quit after five minutes. Turn the game off *right now* or you will lose all privileges for the next week."

Son: "Whatever."

Son continues playing.

Mother: "OK. It looks like you've chosen to lose privileges for the next week. **I need you** to turn off the game within the next two minutes. If not, you will also lose your iPod for the next week."

Son continues playing.

Mother: "You have one minute to turn it off."

Son continues playing.

Mother: "OK. You've chosen to give up your iPod for the next week. **I need you to** turn off the game within the next two minutes. If not, you will also be grounded for the next week."

Son continues playing.

Son: "It's not fair!"

Mother: "You have one minute to turn it off."

Son throws the controller on the floor and turns off the game. He storms off to his room.

Points to note:

- Mother remains calm and collected during this exchange. She does not raise her voice or let her frustration show. In short, she stays focused and on task.
- Mother continues to use the phrase “I need you to...”
Consistent use of this phrase (when the request is indeed a need) will pay dividends over time. Your child *will* learn to pay attention when he hears this phrase and will also learn that there will be negative consequences if his does not follow your request.
- Mother follows the exact same strategy for each opportunity to quit, and continues to add additional consequences until the child complies. If you follow this technique, *never* threaten punishments that you will not enforce.
- Negative punishment (*taking away* privileges) is more effective than positive punishment (*adding* unpleasant consequences). Additionally, negative punishment will be far easier for you to enforce.
- Mother ignores attempts by her son to draw her into a debate or justify her conditions (“It’s not fair”).
- Mother continues to offer two minutes to comply with requests. This is preferred over a rapid-fire escalating exchange between mother and son:

Mother: “If you don’t turn off the game, you will lose it for one week.”

Son ignores request.

Mother: “OK. No more games for one week. If you don’t turn it off right now, you also lose your iPod.”

Son ignores request.

Mother: “Now your iPod is gone also. If you don’t turn it off right now, you are grounded for one week.”

Son ignores request.

Mother: “Great, now you’re grounded too. If you don’t...”

You can see that this exchange is going nowhere and has turned into a battle of wills. Running on emotion rather than reason, neither side wants to back down. This is not the position you want to be in.

You need to allow your child some time to make the right choice (i.e., complying with your request). As long as you are committed to enforcing each additional punishment, there is absolutely no harm in allowing him two minutes to think more rationally about his choice. As you probably already know, children and teens can struggle to make the “logical” choice even under the best of conditions. If you pressure him to decide on the spot, his emotions and feelings of resentment will dominate and he will make choices designed to frustrate you rather than those that are in his own best interest.

Also, giving him two minutes to decide allows him to “save face.” That is, after taking some time to think about the way this exchange is going, he may realize that he needs to cut his losses. But, he doesn’t want to make it seem as though he is giving in and that you have “won”. Rather, you may notice that around the one minute mark he seems to find *other* reasons to stop playing:

“Fine. I was finished playing anyway.”

“Whatever, I need to make a phone call anyway.”

“OK, OK, this guy I’m playing against is an idiot anyway.”

Don’t let these face-saving responses bother you. Does it really matter what reason he provides for quitting? The point is that he has followed your request and has probably learned that it is best to do so sooner rather than later when he hears the words “I need you to...”

Don’t expect him to thank you right now for looking out for him and helping him overcome an addiction. *If* this ever comes it will be at a much later date when he has matured, gained control of his gaming, and can look back on this time of his life with new perspective and insight. For now, accept that he will not understand or appreciate your efforts – but that you will continue to fight for him nonetheless.

Overview of the Want – Need Strategy

- 1) Define whether the request is a want or a need.
- 2) If it is a want, make the request, evaluate additional information, and reconsider if appropriate.
- 3) If it is a need, make the request using “I need you to...”
- 4) Remind your child about what will happen if he does not comply.
- 5) Allow him two minutes to make the decision.
- 6) If he complies, great! You’re finished!
- 7) If he doesn’t comply, add additional consequences for continued non-compliance.
- 8) Return to Step 3 and proceed until you reach Step 6.
- 9) Enforce any punishments that were assigned.

Set and Enforce New Limits on Play

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

This is the second (and last) suggestion that is, almost by definition, essential to include in your treatment plan. If you have decided to address the video game addiction by moderating play time and setting healthy limits, it is critical that these new rules are *very* clear and always enforced. In the previous section I discussed the want-need technique as a way to determine when your requests must be followed, when they are open for debate, and how to respond when your requests are not followed.

Now we need to discuss the video game limits that are appropriate and reasonable for a child or teen. That is, if you have decided that healthy moderation is possible, you must now determine exactly what an acceptable level of play is.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recently recommended a *maximum* of two hours of screen time per day for children. Screen time consists of television, video games, and recreational computer use. I consider this to be a completely reasonable guideline. However, since we are talking about video game addiction, I will also offer my own recommendations for video game use specifically. Unless the parent can make a very good argument for additional play, in my own work with families I typically encourage the following limits:

Maximum Daily Recommended Video Game Time According to Age

Age	Weekday Maximum	Weekend Maximum
6 – 8	45 minutes	1 hour / day
9 – 12	1 hour	1.5 hours / day
13 – 17	1.5 hours	2 hours / day

It is probably safe to conclude that your child is currently playing far more than the recommendations suggested above. Occasionally, parents are surprised by these guidelines and believe that they are too strict.

Take a closer look at these numbers though. Following these guidelines, a 10-year old would be allotted five hours of gameplay during the week (after homework and other responsibilities have been attended to – see page 88) and up to three hours on the weekend, for a total of eight hours per week. Remember that playing video games is a recreational activity / hobby, not a developmental task of childhood (or adulthood for that matter). When they are not being abused, video games can be a relaxing and enjoyable activity – especially when playing in person with friends. But, no one *needs* to play video games. Eight hours maximum per week of video games is perfectly reasonable – despite what your child may believe.

At this point you may be thinking: “My son sometimes plays for eight hours in *one day!* How am I supposed to tell him that he can only play for one hour now?”

Well, since you have chosen the moderation route, you essentially have two choices:

A) Inform him that video game play is now limited to one hour per day on weekdays and two hours per day on weekends and that this will be going into effect in one week (see “The Talk” on page 141).

or

B) Inform him that there will be new rules for video game time that will be going into effect in one week (again, see “The Talk” on page 141). This will involve the gradual reduction of gaming time over the coming weeks until the point of one hour per weekday and two hours on the weekend is reached.

If you plan to pursue the gradual reduction option, I recommend a 5-week plan that steadily lowers the maximum number of daily gaming hours. For this option you will use your estimates of the number of weekday and weekend gaming hours from page 54. As a general guideline, consider reducing the total number of gaming hours by 25% per week after the first week. Similar to the first strategy, I recommend that you allow your child to continue his normal gaming habits for one week after informing him of the upcoming schedule. This will allow him to prepare for the upcoming reduction, hopefully reduce some of the anger that could result with the immediate enforcement of new rules, and give him time to accept that new rules will soon be in place.

Please don't worry about one more week of continued excessive gaming. Given how long video game addiction has been a problem for your child, it is unlikely that an additional week will significantly harm his potential for recovery. I have found that the benefits of giving an addicted gamer one week to prepare for the changes far outweighs any negatives that may come from one more week of unhealthy habits. In fact, some parents who have been unsuccessfully trying to reduce their child's video game play have completely relaxed all rules surrounding video games during this preparation week. The intended message to the child is one of a fresh start, new approach, and a committed strategy for change. Whether you let go of previous rules and strategies during the preparation week is your choice. If you do adopt this approach, be forewarned that you will likely have a very tired child for the week, homework that has not been completed, and a child who attempts to get in as much gaming as possible before the new rules are enforced.

Obviously there is some flexibility with the gradual reduction approach as strict adherence to this rule would mathematically result in zero hours by the end of the fifth week. Let's look at an example for a five-week gradual reduction:

	Average weekday hours = 6 Average weekend hours = 8 Weekday goal = 1 hour Weekend goal = 2 hours	
WEEK 1:	Child is informed that new rules will be enforced starting in one week. No change in current play limits / Possible relaxation of limits Average weekday time = 6 hours Average weekend time = 8 hours	
WEEK 2:	Allotted weekday time = 4.5 hours (25% reduction) Allotted weekend time = 6 hours (25% reduction)	
WEEK 3:	Allotted weekday time = 3 hours (25 % reduction) Allotted weekend time = 4 hours (25% reduction)	
WEEK 4:	Allotted weekday time = 1.5 hours (25% reduction) Allotted weekend time = 2 hours (25% reduction)	
WEEK 5:	Allotted weekday time = 1 hour (17% reduction) Allotted weekend time = 2 hours (no reduction)	

By now you probably have some sense of whether you will be attempting the immediate or gradual reduction approach. And, if you are like most parents you are leaning towards the gradual method.

Before you inform your child of this plan, consider presenting both options and letting *him* decide instead. There is a very high probability that he will choose the gradual method, so unless you feel very strongly about an immediate reduction there is no harm (and many benefits) in permitting him to make the call. Letting a child choose between two different options (both of which ultimately accomplish the same goal) is a very old, but very effective parenting technique ("Would you like to brush your teeth now, or after this TV program is over?"). Allowing your child to choose gives him the sense that he has a say in the decisions that affect his life and also, it encourages "buy-in" since it was he who ultimately made the decision.

Use the worksheet on the following page to determine weekly limits for the gradual reduction strategy. Remember to use the want-need approach (and various other tips outlined later in this manual) to enforce these limits when the plan is activated in week 2.

Worksheet for the gradual reduction approach

Estimated number of daily gaming hours (weekday): _____ A
(see page 54)

Weekday gaming hours goal: _____ B

25% reduction factor ($A \times 0.25$) _____ C

Estimated number of daily gaming hours (weekend): _____ D
(see page 54)

Weekend gaming hours goal: _____ E

25% reduction factor ($C \times 0.25$) _____ F

WEEK 1: Preparation week. No planned reduction.

WEEK 2: Weekday limit = $A - C$: _____ G

Weekend limit = $D - F$: _____ H

WEEK 3: Weekday limit = $G - C$: _____ I

Weekend limit = $H - F$: _____ J

WEEK 4: Weekday limit = $I - C$: _____ K

Weekend limit = $J - F$: _____ L

WEEK 5: Weekday limit = B _____ B

Weekend limit = E _____ E

Homework before Gaming

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Although I have not pre-checked this point as I did with the first two topics, I came very close. I *strongly* recommend that you adopt a “homework before gaming” policy in combination with the other rules and limits you plan to implement.

With regard to the various tasks of childhood and adolescence, many parents would argue that understanding the importance of education, developing a strong work ethic, and valuing school achievement should be top priorities for their children. Mental health professionals may add that it is also very important for children to establish healthy levels of confidence, self-esteem, and to begin developing a sense of who they are and what is important to them.

While still acknowledging the importance of these more abstract developmental tasks, I think we can agree that effort and dedication to school achievement should be a priority for your children – and should certainly come before video games.

Is your child permitted to play video games when he arrives home from school or immediately after dinner...even if homework has not been completed? If so, the implicit message being sent (regardless of what is said explicitly) is that gaming is more important than academic achievement.

There is no reason why your child should be playing video games before completing his homework. Also, if you add this rule to your intervention plan (please do by the way!) make sure to note the quality of his work and the effort he is actually putting into it. The last thing you want is a child who denies having any homework (when he does), or who quickly rushes through it so that he can start gaming. So, check his work after he is finished. Is it a reasonable effort? If not, gaming must wait until the quality is acceptable (note: no need to demand *perfection*). Yes, checking his work does require extra time and effort on your part, but it sends the right message about the importance of his education and may help reduce the amount of time he spends playing video games.

One final note, if you believe that your child is not being honest about the amount of homework he has (this does happen quite often when gaming must wait until after homework is complete), contact his teacher and find out whether he is indeed completing his assignments. Also, it is occasionally difficult to know just what is expected with regard to homework assignments (especially for adolescents with more complex homework). If you are unable to judge the amount of effort he is putting in and whether it is reasonable given the task, ask the teacher about this as well. An informed parent is a parent who is in control!

The “Two for One” Rule

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

On page 171, I suggest negative punishment (removing privileges) as an appropriate response to a refusal to quit playing when time has expired.

As an alternative to removing other privileges, you may choose to stay focused on further limiting video game access. For example, if your child refuses to stop, clearly state that for *each* minute he continues to play, *two* minutes will be subtracted from the time he was originally allowed for his next gaming session (i.e., the “Two for One Rule”).

It is critical that you follow a 1:2 ratio of extra time vs. lost time, because if you implement a simple 1:1 ratio (“for each minute you play now, you lose one minute later”) your child may (will?) take advantage of this. Assume that you have set a daily limit of one hour for game time. He could decide that he wants to play for an extra hour (or two, or three, or four...) and would only lose the same amount during his next session(s). Because his total game time remains the same though, he has not really experienced any negative consequences for disobeying your rule. In fact, *he* has now created a new rule: “I can play for three hours tonight as long as I don’t play for the next two days”.

Although your child may initially keep playing despite a two for one rule, he will soon realize that his gaming time disappears quickly if he disobeys *your* rule. Looking at the same example, let us assume that a child with a one hour daily limit ignores orders to stop and plays for a total of three hours on Monday. He has played two hours beyond his limit and following the 1:2 ratio, now “owes” four hours. He will not be permitted to play again until Saturday. After several of these lessons, he will realize that it is far better to stop playing when time has expired than to ignore the rules you have set.

Note: If necessary, remove and lock up the computer or console during the days he is not permitted to play. Alternatively, during the banned days you may wish to use one of the software/hardware solutions found on page 103.

Create Balance by Encouraging Other Activities

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

If you have done any research at all before reading this manual (which you probably have), I am quite sure you have encountered advice recommending that you should get an addicted child involved in activities other than video games. This is not a new suggestion and it certainly did not originate with me. It is however, worth discussing. Hopefully I can offer additional information or a slightly different perspective.

If we are going to remove an enjoyable activity from someone's life because of the harmful effects, it is always a good idea to replace this activity with something else that is also enjoyable but has fewer harmful consequences. For example, when someone attempts to give up smoking, it is common for them to use chewing gum as a temporary substitute while they are weaning themselves off cigarettes. Of course, not many smokers will find chewing gum as pleasurable as smoking, but the point is that when you are battling an addiction, idle time is not your friend. If you have just given up a significant or important part of your daily activity, being bored or inactive just calls attention to how much you miss the behavior you gave up. This certainly applies to video game addiction.

When you start working with your child to enforce limits on play, you should if possible, attempt to offer alternative activities to occupy his time especially during the first few weeks. However, do not be surprised if your child does not seem interested in doing *anything* during this time. This is very normal. Many parents discover that their child initially believes that other activities can not provide the same level of fun, enjoyment, and excitement that video games did. They may claim that your suggestions are "boring", "pointless", or "stupid".

To generate ideas, you can also talk to your child about the game itself. Make it a goal to find out why he likes the game so much. What aspects seem to appeal to him the most (e.g., competing against others, forming teams and alliances, developing his skills and abilities, etc.). Ask him to describe his favorite character (especially if it is one that he developed himself). The point is that it is OK to discuss the game with your child. He will appreciate the fact that you are showing an interest, you may discover some of the reasons the game is so seductive, and finally, any insight into the game's appeal may make generating alternative activities easier.

You will have far more success in finding alternative activities if you involve your child in the decision-making process. Again, you want your child to know that you are not out to make his life miserable but that you cannot allow him to continue with behavior that has proven to be destructive. You want him to see that you're willing to allow him to try other activities that he may find interesting or enjoyable. Now, in my experience parents often hope that their child will choose something like music lessons or reading as their alternative activity. Honestly, this is not usually what happens and parents should be

willing to entertain the possibility that their child will choose an activity that is not first on the parent's list. In most cases, this is just fine – though it does require that the parent be willing to compromise somewhat.

Think back to the activities that your child has expressed an interest in. Perhaps it was something that you told him he could try “when you are older”. Ask him about these past interests. Maybe there is an activity that you were once unwilling to allow him to participate in, but that you would now reconsider given that he is older or more mature. Again, with children who are addicted to video games, they generally do not choose the activities that their parents would choose for them. But, if these activities help them move past the addiction (and of course, if they are safe, legal, and nondestructive), you should seriously consider trying to make this possible. For example, in the past I have worked with families who have supported their child's desire to try:

- Paintball
- Digital photography
- Acting
- Cadets (a national program in Canada for youth aged 12 to 18 that is associated with the Canadian military)
- Computer programming
- Computer repair
- Part-time jobs
- Web design
- Martial arts
- Drums
- Archery

Clearly, there is a wide variety of interests that these kids were interested in. However, the parents did not choose any of these activities. In fact, some parents were quite hesitant to encourage the activity that was chosen by the child. As you might imagine, some parents are reluctant to bring a drum set into their home! Also, you may notice that there is a tendency towards the more techie (for lack of a better term) activities such as computer programming, computer repair, and web design. Again, some parents are reluctant to promote these activities as alternatives to gaming. Although this is understandable, it is important to acknowledge your child's interests and support the pursuit of these interests if it is being channeled into a positive avenue. For example, a teen who is allowed to take a computer programming or web design class is actually learning a useful skill and most certainly will be challenging himself intellectually and creativity. A teen who is finally allowed to play paintball after many years of begging is socializing with his friends, getting exercise, and developing an interest in a hobby that has far more benefits than playing video games (the parents just need to make sure that he follows proper safety procedures and plays in a responsible manner).

So, rather than *tell* your child what he now needs to do, *ask* him if there is anything that he wants to do and that you would be willing to discuss this with him (but of course make no promises until you know more about the activity). Don't be surprised if he

states that there is “nothing” he wants to do. Let him know that he does not have to make a decision right now but that if there is something he is interested in you would be willing to listen to him at a later time.

Regardless of the age of the child I recommend asking him about possible activities. If he can come up with something and you agree that it is acceptable, this is ideal. However there are times when a child will claim that he does not want to do anything. Should you pick an activity and force him to do it? This is a difficult call to make, especially since I do not know your exact situation (this would be something that an in-person consultation would examine). In general though, I believe that the younger the child, the more appropriate it is to pick an activity and require the child to participate. For example, if your child is nine years old and you have decided that you would like him to participate in karate to replace some of the time he spends playing video games, it may be appropriate to “force” him to attend the lessons. If after one month he still does not enjoy the activity, you may provide him with the option of choosing another activity or remaining in the class. Again, this provides him with some say in the decisions that affect his life.

Conversely, I believe that the older the child, the less useful it is to pick the activity and require your child to participate. This is not to say that this approach is never appropriate. However, it is generally less effective with older teens. You took control by removing video games (remember, this is a need), but depending on your child, forcing him to participate in another activity may be pushing too hard (and ultimately this is a want, not a need).

I do believe that it is very helpful for a young child or an older teen to find an activity that is enjoyable when video game time is reduced or eliminated. I think you *can* force this for a young child (remember to reevaluate this activity on an ongoing basis and consider other options), but you definitely *do not* have a responsibility to provide this activity or force it on an older teen. Your primary responsibility is to decrease the amount of unhealthy video game time, not to frantically search for activity after activity if your child repeatedly expresses disinterest in your suggestions.

Try a bit of brainstorming right now. What might your child enjoy as a new activity, interest, or hobby? Is there anything that he has asked about doing in the past that you would now consider? Write down any possibilities below, but remember that it is most important to ask him for his ideas.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

Become Familiar with the ESRB

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

The [Electronic Software Rating Board](#) (ESRB) is a non-profit organization that assigns ratings to virtually all commercially marketed video games. The primary purpose of these ratings is to provide parents with information about the suitability of specific games for their children (ratings can be found on the front cover of the box for all games). Ratings are based on game themes, violence, language, nudity, sexuality, crude humor and every game is classified into one of six categories:

EC (Early Childhood):	“Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.”
E (Everyone):	“Content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older.”
E 10+ (Everyone 10 +):	“May contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.”
T (Teen):	“May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language.”
M (Mature):	“Content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. May contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.”
AO (Adults Only):	“Content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. May include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.”

If you are not familiar with the ESRB rating system, you really should take the time to do some research at the [website](#).

Although simply following the ratings guide will not necessarily prevent an addictive game from entering your home, it will help to ensure that your child does not play games with inappropriate content for his age. From this point onward, it would be a very good practice to always check the ESRB rating on games that will potentially enter your home. If your child is not old enough to play, the game is not purchased – quite simple really. Additional tips for using ESRB ratings are available [here](#).

Additionally, in my experience, following the ESRB ratings will prevent *some* of the more addictive games from getting into your child’s hands. For example, most Call of Duty games are rated M, yet I have encountered children as young as 9 who are addicted.

Educate Yourself and Make Informed Decisions on Games

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

As previously mentioned, many children and most teens have more experience with the latest electronic gadgets and have a better understanding of modern technology than their parents do. This is especially true with video games. Did you know that almost any game that can be purchased online or in a retail store can be easily (illegally) downloaded for free? Do you know what a “torrent” is? What is a “raid”? What does “PK” stand for? Do you know where you can learn more about the games that will potentially enter your home before they are actually installed?

Luckily, there are a number of excellent resources for parents who wish to stay informed about the technology their children are using, who prefer to be knowledgeable about the specific games their children request, and who are dedicated to keeping their children safe online. As long as you have access to the internet there is nothing preventing you from educating yourself on the world of online gaming. Yes, there is a lot to learn. Yes, it will require more time and energy from you. But, knowledge is definitely power – not only for beating video game addiction now, but also for preventing it from reappearing in the future.

The websites below (with the exception of IGN) are primarily intended for parents who wish to stay informed about the influences of modern technology on children and how to keep them safe in a world that is constantly connected. Although the websites span a wide range of topics, all include stories, articles, and reviews on video games from a *parent’s* perspective. If you are wondering “What do I need to know about this game before I allow my child to play?”, you should be able to find the answer at one of the websites below.

[The Source for Parents](#) – Video game reviews for parents. Provides information on violence, sexual content, language, and whether a particular game is appropriate for children or teens.

[CommonSenseMedia](#) – This website covers a wider range of media. In addition to video game reviews and recommendations from a parent’s perspective, it also focuses on movies, websites, television, books and music. Game overviews are very informative and detailed descriptions are provided on why a game may or may not be appropriate for your child. A unique feature is that specific parent-child discussion topics are provided based on the content of the game.

[IGN](#) – Detailed game reviews and descriptions for PCs and consoles. IGN is intended for gamers, but it can also be a good resource for informed parents.

Let go of the Guilt

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

“If only I wouldn’t have allowed this game into the house...”

I have lost count of how many times a parent has expressed this thought during a consultation. When a child becomes addicted to video games, parents often have a deep sense of guilt for not only allowing the game into the house, but for not recognizing that the game had evolved from a pastime into an addiction. Some even believe that they have failed as parents because they were not able to protect their child from the addiction. Others look back and see that they recognized that the gaming was excessive, but dismissed the possibility that *their* child could become addicted. After all, what are the chances of someone truly becoming addicted? It must be quite low, right?

Although the exact percentage of young players who become addicted is up for debate (differences in study methodology and sample populations have complicated the hypothetical rate of addiction), most research suggests prevalence rates of 5 – 10% of all active gamers (see [here](#) for one such study). Additionally, if we consider only the MMO genre, this number may be even higher. Even if we use a conservative 5% estimate, *millions* of children and teens playing video games translates into hundreds of thousands of young people who are addicted to gaming.

My point is that (fortunately...and unfortunately) you are not alone. Video game addiction in children and teens may not receive much media attention (especially compared to the attention given to the effects of violent video games), but it is most certainly a growing problem.

Know that many video games are purposefully designed using well-established psychological principals to encourage excessive play (see page 32 on why video games are addictive for examples of these principals). A player who is initially rewarded for short periods of play and quickly finds himself devoting hours per day to the game is responding *exactly* as the game designers have intended. The goal is to hook the player quickly, reward him for increasingly longer gaming sessions, generate feelings of accomplishment, and create commitments to other players through the social component of the online world.

Try to let go of the belief that it is your “fault” that your child is addicted to video games. At this point, assigning blame (even on the company that made the game) does very little good, and it certainly does not help your child overcome the addiction. Rather than *blaming* yourself (or your child) for the addiction, accept that it is your *responsibility* to beat the addiction and rescue your child. You are not a bad parent. You care about the well-being of your child (or else you would not be reading this manual), but were caught off-guard by something that was expertly crafted to reward unhealthy levels of play.

Don’t feel guilty about the past, but proud of what you are about to do.

No Consoles or Computers in the Bedroom

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

One of the worst mistakes a parent can make with regard to video games, is to allow their child to have a computer (especially one with internet access) or game console in their room. Apart from the safety issues of a child or teen accessing the internet (and having *others* access them), being able to play video games in the privacy of one's own room dramatically increases the likelihood of overuse and addiction.

By moving gaming systems to common areas or family rooms, you are in a far better position not only to monitor the appropriateness of his online activities and the types of games he is playing, but also to determine *how much* he is playing. If you allow a computer or game system in his room, it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to monitor his play time and enforce the limits you have set. He may set his alarm to wake him in the middle of the night to play. He may reinstall games that you removed. He may lead you to believe that he is studying when in fact he is gaming. Did you know that there are simple programs that run simultaneously with video games and with the click of a button makes the game disappear and fake "work" appear? Even if your child appears to be working when you enter the room, this is may not be true. A child or teen addicted to video games will be very resourceful to get his "fix" of gaming – please do not make it any easier for him.

What about handheld games, smartphones, and tablets? Obviously, it will be more of a challenge to keep portable gaming systems out of your child's bedroom, but this does not mean that it is not worth enforcing. In addition to only permitting computer or console play in common areas, it is appropriate to set a rule that portable gaming systems can also only be played in certain areas of the home. I hope that this does not seem unreasonable to you. Yes, portable games are designed to be played virtually anywhere, but they should also be played in moderation. Your child has demonstrated that he cannot currently play in moderation without strict limits. If you have removed the primary systems from his room and have placed tighter restrictions on gaming in general, I can virtually guarantee that he will turn to covert portable gaming in his room if this is allowed. Do not allow decisions like this to undermine your hard work. For a child who is addicted to video games, his room should be a video game-free zone – no exceptions. If you put this rule in place and discover that he is secretly playing (easy to do with handheld devices) remove the game immediately and enforce any predetermined consequences for breaking the rules (see page 183 on "The Contract").

Removing your child's computer or gaming system from his room will be a *very* unpopular decision...but it is something that really has to be done for you to monitor and enforce healthier levels of play.

Set Parental Controls on Consoles and Computers

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

When it comes to computers and video games, children very often have an advantage over their parents with regard to technical knowledge. Unless you happen to work in the computer industry or are very interested in new technology and gadgets, it is very possible that your child knows more about the workings of the family computer / game system than you do. This is not a position you want to be in.

Although it would be great if parents always had a superior working knowledge of the technology their children are using, this is a rather difficult competition to win. Unlike you, your child has grown up with computers, may have more time to spend using them, and may have a greater intrinsic interest in them. If your child has a natural interest in technology / electronics (true for many people who are addicted to video games) and you do not, his knowledge will almost certainly be greater than yours.

If you are outmatched with regard to technical know-how, does this mean that you are unable to fight the addiction on this front? Absolutely not. You still have options, and they start with learning how to set up parental controls on video game consoles and home computers.

Parental controls on video games were initially intended as a way for parents to control the types of games their children were permitted to play. For example, a parent may decide that his nine-year old is not permitted to play any games with violent or sexual content. He chooses this option on the game system, sets a password, and games with such content will no longer work on the system. As discussed in the section on the ESRB, this is something you should consider doing. Of note, parental control settings have expanded considerably from the time they were first introduced. Today, most (if not all) major gaming systems also allow parents to control the maximum daily gaming time, permissible hours for play (e.g., between 9:00 and 10:00 PM), block or restrict online access, schedule automatic shutdowns, and much more. Needless to say, learning how to use parental control settings in combination with clear limits and rules for gaming will make fighting this addiction much easier.

Note: Individual games may also have their own parental controls that are separate from the overall system controls. This is especially true for PC games, as computers (unlike consoles) generally do not have overall system settings that will apply to all games. Generally, these settings offer an even great level of control over play (see page 102 on setting parental controls for World of Warcraft).

So, now that you know about parental controls, how do you set them?

Luckily there are several good online guides for parents who want to access and set parental controls for video games:

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT USING PARENTAL CONTROLS

- *The Parent's Guide to Video Games, Parental Controls, and Online Safety* is available [here](#).

XBOX 360 and XBOX One

- The Family Settings page for Xbox 360 is available [here](#). XBOX One security settings are [here](#).

PLAYSTATION 3, PLAYSTATION 4, PSP, and PS Vita

- The PlayStation Knowledge Centre for Parents is [here](#).

Wii and WiiU

- The Wii Parental Controls page is [here](#). The WiiU Parental Controls page is [here](#).

PC

- *Windows XP* has no built in Parental Controls feature, so you may want to consider one of the software solutions found on page 103. Alternatively, a workaround using existing Windows XP programs can be found [here](#).
- *Windows Vista* Parental Controls can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- *Windows 7* Parental Controls can be found [here](#).
- *Windows 8* Parental Controls can be found [here](#).

Notes:

- If you do not feel comfortable setting parental controls yourself for the first time, don't hesitate to enlist a "techie" friend for help or call customer support for your particular console, game, or system.

- I hate to say it, but even though you have set parental controls on your console or computer, this does not mean that you can be sure that your child is only playing when you have assigned times, has not reinstalled games, and has not found a way to access whatever he wants whenever he wants!

Try this, go to Google and type in “windows 8 parental controls”. Notice that if you have the auto-complete feature of Google enabled, there may be a suggested term of “windows 8 parental controls hacks”. Clicking on this will produce dozens of pages on how to bypass the controls you have just set up. Depending on your system and the technical know-how of your child, circumventing the controls may be very difficult...or very easy. The point is that setting parental controls in no way *guarantees* that your child will be limited by the restrictions you set. If he is very determined and computer-savvy he will find a way.

If you discover that your child is bypassing the controls you set for him, treat this as a violation of your contract and respond as seriously as you would for non-compliance with a verbal need request (see page 74). That is, following your discovery you should put tighter restrictions on play, remove additional privileges, or any other punishment that is appropriate. If your child *continues* to violate your rules by bypassing parental controls or limits, you need to consider whether moderation is possible, and whether a ban or other drastic measures may be necessary (see page 187).

Become an Administrator on Home Computers

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

As mentioned in the last point, it is generally quite easy to set parental controls on a modern video game console so that only certain games can be played, online access is controlled and monitored, and so that limits on playing time are enforced.

On a PC, if the parental controls settings (found above) are not sufficient (although they should be for most homes), you should learn how to give yourself “system administrator” status on your home computers, or look into other software solutions (see page 103).

The user who is set as a system administrator controls virtually every aspect of how the computer is used (different users can be assigned different privileges). For example, he or she can determine what programs the other users can access, which games can be played, the availability of internet access, when the computer can be accessed, whether new programs and games can be installed or uninstalled, etc. etc. etc.

If your child is addicted to a game that is played on a computer, it is very important that you have administrator rights *and* know how to assign or restrict privileges. For example, if you are the administrator you can uninstall any games that your child has been unable to play in moderation and be quite sure that he will not be able to reinstall the game. Although if he is *really* tech-savvy he may find a way around it, so you should continue to monitor what is on the computer.

Although setting yourself as a system administrator is quite straightforward (instructions are provided below) setting appropriate access for the various users in your home is usually not as simple as setting parental controls on game consoles. If this is completely new to you, it would be wise to get help from a friend who is comfortable in this area. If this is not possible, consult with tech support at a local electronics or computer retailer – they will most likely be willing to offer a setup service (for a fee course).

To set yourself as an administrator (assigning privileges to users is the second step):

- Instructions for Windows XP are [here](#).
- Instructions for Windows Vista are [here](#).
- Instructions for Windows 7 are [here](#).
- Instructions for Windows 8 are [here](#).

Access Parental Controls on Individual Games

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the previous two sections, I discussed setting parental controls to make system-wide changes to consoles and computers, and assigning user privileges as a system administrator. Also, some of the more popular video games (especially those in the MMO genre) have additional parental controls to limit access. The publishers argue that these controls have been added as a way to empower parents, while others (who are more skeptical of their motives) have argued that these controls serve as a way for the company to disown responsibly for cases of addiction. Regardless of the motivation behind the controls, using these settings properly can be very helpful for those with children addicted to video games.

As mentioned above, if a game has additional parental controls it will likely be in the MMORPG, MMO, or FPS genre (not surprisingly, these happen to be the most addictive genres of video games). How you enable and setup these control will vary from game to game, but they generally involve accessing the company / game webpage and creating a parental control account that is tied to your child's user account. From there, you should be able to set limits on daily time, access periods, content, and a variety of other options.

If you are not sure if your child's game has parental control options, call the company and ask (the more people that do this the more likely we will see these types of controls in all online games). If the game does have additional parental control options, customer support should be able to walk you through the setup. As an example, I have provided a link on how to set up parental controls for World of Warcraft (the game that currently seems to have the most risk for addiction). Check the game manual, the website, search for "Name of Game parental controls", or call customer support to learn more about parental control options for your child's game of choice.

- Parental control information for World of Warcraft is [here](#).
- In addition to blocking access to the game, you may also wish to block access to certain websites related to the game or video games in general (an addict will spend hours at a time just reading about a favorite game). The best way to prevent access to specific websites is by changing administrator settings or by using one of the software solutions in the following section. However, here is a quick (but easily bypassed) method for preventing access in Internet Explorer:
 1. Open Internet Explorer
 2. Tools – Internet Options – Security
 3. Click on Restricted Sites, and then Sites
 4. Type the website address (e.g., www.worldofwarcraft.com) and click "add"
 5. Close and click "OK"

Hardware and Software Solutions

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the previous three sections I outlined the methods of setting parental controls to limit and monitor your child's gaming habits. If for some reason these options are not suited to your situation, there are additional hardware and software solutions for limiting access to video games.

Hardware fixes involve physically attaching a device to a video game console, TV, monitor, or computer. Hardware fixes are typically (but not always) more appropriate for game consoles that are attached to a TV, whereas software fixes are usually more appropriate for limiting computer access. Let's take a look at just a few of the *many* hardware devices and software solutions intended to give parents control over their child's gaming habits.

Please note that I have no affiliation with any of these companies and provide these resources simply to give you a sense of the types of products that exist. If you are interested in any of these devices or software packages (or others not listed here), please conduct additional research on the product or contact the company to see if it is suitable for your situation.

Note: No hardware or software solution is foolproof. If your child is knowledgeable with computers / technology and is very determined, he may find a way to defeat the controls you set. For a general overview on how someone may override parental controls please read the linked article: [How Tech Savvy Teens Defeat Parental Control Software](#).

Examples of Hardware Devices to Control Video Game Access

BOB



Website:

<http://www.usebob.com/>

Product works by...

Attaching and locking (a key is provided) to the end of the power cable of any electronic device (e.g., game console, TV, etc.). The parent can then enter a pin number and set daily or weekly limits on access time. BOB automatically turns off the device when time has expired.

Price:

\$62 at [Amazon](#).

Additional Notes:

- Better for limiting console play than computer gaming
- Up to 6 users / accounts
- Also allows parents to block all access during specified times
- A very similar device called "TimesUp" can be found [here](#).
- Another similar device called "TV Allowance" can be found [here](#).



TimesUp



TV Allowance

StoPower



Website:

http://www.familysafemedia.com/powerstop_power_plug_lock.html

Product works by...

Attaching to the end of any power cable.

Price:

\$13

<http://www.amazon.com/Roride-RRKA-StoPower-Power-Plug/dp/B0014ZXWCS>

Additional Notes:

- As can be seen in the picture above, this is a simple lock that prevents an electronic device from being used. It will not allow parents to set specific limits and will not shut down a console or computer after a predetermined time limit. This device may be useful for preventing use when a parent is not present, but it is missing key features with regard to setting time limits.
- Don't be surprised if your child (especially if he is a teen) manages to find or buy another power supply, thus rendering this method quite easy to defeat. Of course, such behavior would consequentially be met with appropriate punishment or even tighter limits. Again, if your child continues to break the rules you have put in place and this behavior is not changed by additional restrictions, you may need to consider banning all video game access (see more on this starting on page 187).

PlayLimit



Website:

http://www.familysafemedia.com/playlimit_play_limit_timer.html

Product works by...

Locking the connector cables of a video game console inside the device. Parents provide tokens each worth 15 minutes of play time (40 tokens come with the device).

Price:

\$45

http://www.familysafemedia.com/playlimit_play_limit_timer.html

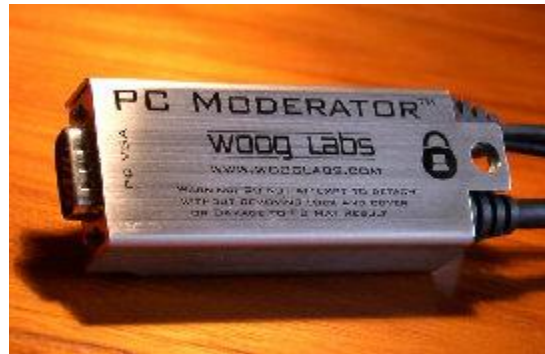
Additional Notes:

- The unique aspect of this device is that it encourages the child to manage his own time – thus promoting self-discipline, self-control, and delay of gratification. The downside is that parents must continually provide tokens rather than set a predetermined time for each day (although this may be a relatively minor inconvenience).
- More appropriate for younger children. Teens may be somewhat insulted by what they perceive to be a “childish” token system.

- A general note for any device such as this one that uses the console's connection cables to block access: Using this device on a modern console with high definition graphics (for example, one using a HDMI output) will result in degradation of both graphic and sound quality. Young children (10 or younger) may not notice a difference, but teens will certainly be aware of the change. Don't worry too much about this – you can use it to your advantage. Your child will not be happy about the lower resolution and inferior sound quality, but this may be yet another incentive to prove to you that he can play in moderation. For example, assume that after initial resistance to a video game limiting device, he eventually realizes that you *will not* give in and abides by your set daily limits for several months. He accepts these new conditions for play - the constant battles and complaining subsides. At this point you *may* wish to give him the chance to demonstrate that he can control his game time without the device. To remove the device and also regain access to superior video and sound quality, you may make a contract with him (see page 183) specifying exactly the conditions he must now follow. Ideally, developing self-control and abiding by your rules is preferable to using a device that physically limits access. Of course, if he is unwilling or unable to do this, the device must return.
- A very similar system called TimeMachine can be found [here](#). This device locks the connection cables and the power supply.



PC Moderator



Website:

http://www.pcmoderator.com/wooglabs3_010.htm

Product works by...

Attaching and locking to the video port on a computer. The parent then creates a password and user accounts to set limits on computer use. Power to the monitor is lost when time has expired.

Price:

\$90 - \$120

Website:

[http://www.pcmoderator.com/#Detailed Specifications](http://www.pcmoderator.com/#Detailed%20Specifications)

Product Claims:

- “Unlike parental control software or operating system security features, the PC Moderator does not require parents to be the system administrator or know more about the computer than the teen. With the PC Moderator installed, parents can effortlessly (and with much less conflict) limit the total amount of time their children can use the computer each day and the times of day that use is allowed. Since it operates virtually independent of the computer, it is compatible with all operating systems and applications and cannot be hacked or disabled through programming or software means.”

Additional Notes:

- This is one of the few hardware solutions specifically designed for computer use. Although the other hardware devices discussed above (BOB, TimesUp, PlayLimit, TimeMachine) *can* technically be connected to a computer, the sudden loss of power could potentially damage your system.
- If your child is addicted to a game that is played on a computer *and* you have decided to add a hardware control device to your treatment plan, this would likely be a better solution than the other devices discussed above.

Examples of Software to Control Video Game Access

Time Boss



Website:

<http://nicekit.com/parental-control-software.htm>

Cost:

- 30 day free trial, \$35 to purchase

Product Claims:

- “You can specify an individual computer time limit for any user you want on working with the computer, internet or applications. You can set the time limits per day, per week and by time-table.”
- “Time Boss keeps an informative event log and a screenshot log for all users, thus monitoring all events is very simple. Program gives you full statistics of the computer usage.”
- “The "black" list of the forbidden programs, Internet sites, folders or disks with individual time limits for each item.”

Additional Note:

- A similar software package called TimesUpKidz (with a 30-day free trial) can be found [here](#).

EZ Internet Timer



Website:

<http://www.yoursafetyguide.com/>

Cost:

- 14 day free trial, \$30 to purchase

Product Claims:

- “Schedule when to stop all on-line activity or use predefined Internet filters.”
- “6 Independent Timers to control Web Surfing, Messaging, Emailing, Internet usage and more.”
- “Precise Internet Shutdown / Internet ON time.”
- “Separate schedule for each day of the week.”
- “Independently schedule timed shutdown of online activities like web-surfing, messaging including chat rooms, emailing and online gaming.”

Additional Notes:

- The company also offers separate software programs to restrict internet sites and to keep computers turned off until a specified time period.

PG Surfer



Website:

<http://www.pgsurfer.com/product.aspx>

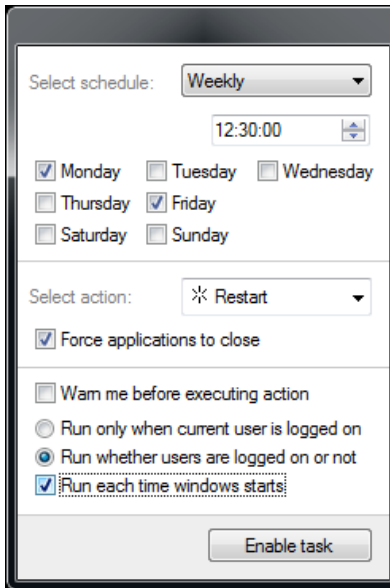
Cost:

- Free

Product Claims:

- “Restricting computer access for certain times and users.”
- “Stopping the downloading of files such as music, video and games.”
- “Blocking chat rooms and applications for instant messaging, email (online and desktop-based), peer-to-peer file sharing.”

SwitchOff



Website:

<http://www.airytec.com/en/switch-off/>

Cost:

- Free

Product Claims:

- “Switch Off is a lightweight easy-to-use tray-based system utility that could automatically shutdown, suspend or hibernate your system. Simple password protected Web interface allows you to initiate operations remotely from any computer or mobile (cell) phone with web browser installed.”

Additional Notes:

If you prefer not to place so much dependence on an external device for moderating your child’s computer game habits, but would still consider using a simple system shutdown application for the end of the night (often the most problematic time period), there are many programs that do exactly this. Many of the previously discussed software solutions will, in addition to limiting play to certain times, also shut down the computer at a specific time. But, if you do not wish to use the additional time-limiting features of these more complicated applications, a free program like SwitchOff may be more appropriate. A parent who wants to take full responsibility for enforcing allowable play times may still consider using a shutdown application to remind their child that gaming is over for the day (most shutdown programs also have a countdown option).

Monitor Activity with a Keylogger

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Admittedly, this tip may be a bit controversial. If you are not familiar with the term, keyloggers are programs (or hardware devices) that secretly record *every* keystroke on a computer. Passwords and usernames are revealed. Chat sessions are transcribed. Exact website addresses are listed. Screenshots are captured. *Everything* that a user does is monitored and sent to the administrator.

Obviously the potential for abuse with a keylogger is very high and some privacy advocates believe that the unauthorized use of keyloggers should be a criminal offense. Keyloggers are often marketed towards parents who wish to monitor a child's computer or online activities. Using a keylogger for this purpose is in no way illegal...but whether it is considered *morally acceptable* will vary from parent to parent. Some parents argue that using a keylogger to spy on a child is very similar to reading his or her diary – it is viewed as a violation of trust and as such, is unacceptable behavior for a parent. Other parents argue that they have a right to closely monitor what their children do online. They argue that they have a responsibility to protect their children – even if this means that they are observing their computer use with their knowledge.

What are your thoughts on secretly monitoring your child's computer usage? I can almost *guarantee* that the reports will reveal much more than his gaming activity. Would you be prepared to deal with the information you may discover? How would your relationship be affected if he discovered that you were monitoring his activity without permission? You really need to think about these questions before installing a keylogger. If you have decided against a keylogger based on your answers, go ahead and skip to the next section now – no need to read on.

Still here?

With the very real risks in mind, what are the potential benefits of using a keylogger?

The most obvious benefit is that you will *definitely* know what your child is doing online and on his computer. If you have set limits and cannot always monitor his use in person (for example, when he is home alone, when you are asleep, etc.) this is a way to determine if he is following your rules and if he is telling you the truth about his playing time.

Take a moment to think about the logical outcome of using a keylogger to monitor game use. Either you discover that he is playing within the limits you set, or you discover that he is hiding his gaming time. If he is abiding by your rules, some may argue that you did not gain much by monitoring his activities. If you discover that he is playing more than you permitted, what do you do? Following the want-need technique, you need to enforce the predetermine consequences for breaking the rules. But, this means that you must reveal that you have been secretly monitoring him (I do not suggest lying to your

child about how you know he is still playing excessively). Are you prepared to now tell him that you have been watching *all* of his computer activities?

No? Go ahead and skip to the next section.

Yes? Here is one free-to-try keylogger and one completely free program (again, I have no affiliation with the software companies):

Family Cyber Alert



Cost: 7 day free trial, \$40 to purchase

Website: <http://www.itcompany.com/fca.htm>

Product Description:

“Are you concerned about your children’s online activities? Do you feel you should keep a closer eye on what they are doing in Cyber Space? The dangers that children face on the Internet are well documented, too often in the headline news. Parents recognize the need to better monitor their children’s online activity, but don’t have the time or the proper tools. Concerned parents are using Family Cyber Alert to keep a watchful eye on their children and monitor their PC/Internet activities. Family Cyber Alert will record everything your children do online.”

Desktop Shark



Cost: Free

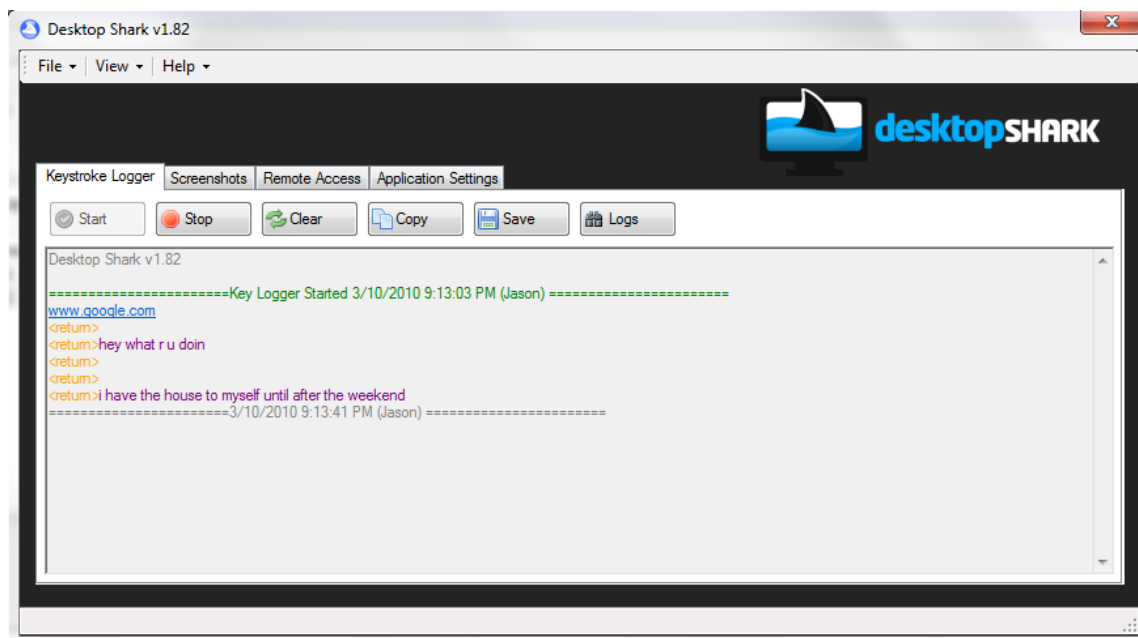
Website: <http://desktopshark.com/>

Product Description:

“Desktop Shark is a virtually undetectable software spy tool that allows monitoring of your PC. It monitors keystrokes using its built in keylogger and has the ability to work over a network or via email. It also contains an administrative console that can be revealed by user-specified key combinations making it safe and hidden. Desktop Shark also monitors chats, browser history, screen snapshots, web searches, and application history.”

“Unlike many competitors, Desktop Shark DOES NOT contain spyware or viruses and completely uninstalls without leaving any trace of its presence.”

“Whether you want to monitor your child’s activity, a cheating spouse or employees... Desktop Shark is a great solution. Its free, easy to use interface will reveal anything the user does on the computer.”



Work and Play Computers

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

The tendency to get distracted by more interesting online diversions (gaming, chatting, email, shopping, videos, music, etc. etc. etc.) when sitting down at the computer to work is probably something that most users (including parents) are familiar with. Even though you may only need 30 minutes to write that (rather unpleasant) report or paper, it can take hours or days if you are repeatedly pulled from your task by your favorite applications, games, or websites...which are all just a click away. This temptation is even more difficult for a child or teen to resist.

How many computers are in your home? When it comes time to purchase a new system, you may be tempted to throw out or sell your old computer. Today, most of the parents that come to me for help with their child's video game addiction have more than one computer in the home. Many families have laptop and desktop systems as well as one or two retired computers in storage.

If your family happens to have more than one computer, this gives you yet another method of fighting your child's video game addiction. Note that new or powerful computers are *not* necessary for this intervention technique. If one of the computers is 10 years old but can still run word processing programs and access the internet, this is perfectly fine. If you do not have a second computer right now but would like to try this technique, *new* (lower end) computers can be purchased for less than \$300 – and even less if you are willing to buy a used system. The advantage of having more than one computer is that it makes it easier for you to enforce limits for gaming time and for maintaining a clear line between "work" and "play".

If you have the resources (i.e., more than one computer) consider turning one (usually the older one) into a bare-bones machine for your child's schoolwork only. Uninstall all games – does he really need Call of Duty or WoW on the computer he uses for school? Remove all "entertainment" bookmarks and applications (yes, this includes Facebook). Set up filters blocking access to prohibited websites. Basically, you want to be left with a computer that allows your child to get his work done...and nothing else. This is now his Schoolwork Computer. When he has homework to do, this is the computer he must use.

On the other computer (probably the more powerful one) he can still access his favorite websites, applications, and games according to your rules and set time limits. This is now the Entertainment Computer.

This two-system setup works particularly well for children / teens in combination with a parent-enforced daily limit for computer use not related to schoolwork. For example, if a parent has set a one hour limit per weeknight on the Entertainment Computer, this still allows the child to use the Schoolwork Computer as necessary for homework (even if this occasionally means several hours per night for larger assignments). The advantage is twofold:

- 1) You no longer have to worry that your child is secretly gaming or chatting when he is supposed to be working.
- 2) Your child will be less distracted and accomplish more when he is actually working.

Note: If you follow this advice for your family, make sure to give yourself system privileges on the Schoolwork Computer so that your child does not secretly install all his old games and applications.

Defending Rules After They Are Set

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

After you have settled on your intervention plan (see page 211), had “the talk” (see page 141), enacted rules, and put any techniques, systems, or procedures in place, your patience and resolve will be tested by your child.

Comments like “It’s not fair!” and “My friend can play as much as he wants!” will become more frequent. Do you address these comments? Do you try to defend your decisions at this stage? The simple answer is “yes” you can address the comments (in a very specific way), and “no” you do not need to defend your decisions.

When you first discuss your plan with your child (see page 141) you will be addressing a number of important issues including why you have made these decisions, your expectations from him, and the fact that there will be consequences if rules are not followed. It is important to explain to your child why you *need* to take these actions (he deserves to be informed about decisions that affect his life), but he does not need to understand or agree with these decisions.

After you have explained your reasons, you do not need to continuously justify the implementation of the rules and practices. He *will* claim that it is not fair. He *will* inform you that other kids can play more than he can.

Your response?

Child: “This isn’t fair! Matt’s parents let him play as much as he wants!”

Parent: “I know you don’t think it is fair. I know others play more than you do. I love you and I need to do what is best for you, not what is easiest. These are the rules for our house.”

Child: “Why? This isn’t fair!”

Parent: “Yes, I know this seems unfair to you. These are the rules for our house.”

Child: “This is so *stupid*! Everyone else gets to play!”

Parent: “These are the rules for our house.”

Child: “But *why*?”

Parent: “I think we’re finished here. This conversation isn’t really going anywhere. Let me know when you want to talk about something else.”

Notes:

- During “The Talk” the parent already explained why he / she needs to have these new rules in place. It is unlikely that the child *really* wants to know why he must follow these rules. He is not looking for justification, he is looking for a weakness in the reasoning that can be exploited. The limits and rules you have put in place do not have to be explained time after time. Until *you* are convinced that he has developed greater self-control and are willing to entertain the possibility of relaxing some of the rules, do not get pulled into an argument or debate – you have very little to gain and will only encourage additional resistance.
- Do not simply repeat these *exact* statements every time you are questioned about the rules. Use language that reflects what he is saying to you. In the first exchange, the goal is to:
 - 1) Acknowledge how he is feeling
 - 2) Convey that you need to do what is best for him
 - 3) State that these are the rules for the house
- In each subsequent exchange the parent eliminates one point from his or her response until only “These are the rules of the house” remains. At this point the parent ends the conversation by stating that he/she is finished and invites the child to talk again when something else is on his mind. The parent is ending *this* conversation, but he/she does not want to end *all* communication with the child, so an invitation to talk about something else at a later time is a good way to end interaction.
- Note that as the child persists, the parent remains calm and actually provides *briefer* responses. Remember that you are battling an addiction that will do everything in its power to weaken and defeat you. You need to stay in control. By refusing to debate an issue that has already been explained and by giving shorter, more direct responses, you send the message that you will not be distracted and are determined to do what is necessary to help your child.

Working with a Psychologist or Counsellor

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

When should I consider making an appointment with a psychologist?

You love your child. You recognize that he is addicted to video games and needs help.

When you first became concerned about his excessive gaming, you may have waited for awhile to see if it was “just a phase”.

He continued playing...

Then, you probably asked him to cut back on how much he was playing. He promised that he would.

He continued playing...

Next, you tried to set rules and enforce punishments.

He continued playing...

Maybe you talked to other parents and followed what they do to keep gaming in moderation.

He continued playing...

Perhaps you searched the internet for tips on dealing with video game addiction, but found less than helpful bits of advice such as “Give him books instead of video games.”

He continued playing...

Eventually you downloaded this guide and are now working through the exercises and are putting an intervention plan in place.

If he *still* continues to play despite your very best efforts...

Consider booking an in-person consultation with a psychologist.

Additionally, if any of the following conditions are true, you may want to seek help from an experienced child or family psychologist:

- **You suspect a concurrent emotional or psychological difficulty that you are unable to deal with.**

Early in this guide I touched on the interaction of video game addiction (A) and other mental health issues (B). Is video game addiction caused by an “underlying condition”? (Short answer: Sometimes, but not always). Is the other mental health issue caused by video game addiction? (Again, sometimes, but not always). Can these issues exist independently from the other difficulty? Absolutely.

If, in addition to video game addiction, you believe that your child is experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties (for example, depressed mood, very low self-confidence, significant attention and concentration difficulties, problems with anxiety, poor peer interactions, adjustment difficulties to family stressors, history of trauma, etc.) you may wish to seek additional help from a psychologist or counsellor.

If he is expressing suicidal thoughts or has done so in the past, you should *definitely* consult with a mental health professional *before* limiting or removing access to the game.

Regardless of whether A caused B, B caused A, or if A and B exist independently, it is best if both the addiction and any other significant difficulties are addressed. Let’s imagine that B in this example is a combination of depression and low self-esteem. By following the tips, techniques, and suggestions in this guide you may be able to place limits on gaming, enforce tighter rules, and gain control over your child’s excessive gaming habits. However, unless the depression and low self-esteem were *caused* by the video game addiction, these problems will probably remain even after gaming returns to an acceptable level. If these issues are relatively straightforward, you may feel comfortable helping your child yourself. However, if the difficulties are clearly beyond your comfort level or expertise you may find it helpful to consult with a mental health professional.

- **You anticipate that your child will become extremely angry or even violent when you place limits on gaming.**

Do not put yourself at risk for physical harm. If your child *has* been violent towards you in the past, he likely needs more assistance than the interventions contained in this manual will provide. If he has *threatened* to harm you physically, the same advice applies – do not put yourself at risk for physical harm.

Depending on your situation, advice from a psychologist, counsellor, family doctor, community service organization, or law enforcement agency may be appropriate contact points.

- **Despite your efforts to convince your spouse or partner, he / she refuses to acknowledge that gaming is a problem and will not enforce rules.**

If you are married or living with a partner who is involved with raising your child, this person *must* be on the same page as you with regard to your child's video game addiction. I will be very clear on this point:

If you try to enforce a new set of rules for video games and your partner does not support you, the intervention will almost certainly fail.

As you probably already know, children and teens are experts at the “divide and conquer” technique. For a moment, think back to when your child was much younger and first asked you for something (which you declined)...and then proceeded to ask your spouse or partner for the same thing (with the hope that he / she would say yes). Basic divide and conquer tactics here, but they can be extremely effective at undermining the authority of one parent over another.

If your spouse or partner will not support your approach to treating this addiction, it will *very* difficult to proceed with the necessary interventions. Your child will discover the split almost immediately and pit one parent against the other (and of course, will side with the more permissive one). You may be pulled into conflicts with your partner and consequently, not have the strength to proceed with your intervention plan. For this reason, you must make sure that your spouse or partner will support your efforts and enforce new rules for acceptable play. Obviously it is *best* if he / she agrees that your child's video game habits are problematic and that action must be taken. However, a spouse who remains skeptical may be acceptable if he / she is still willing to enforce new limits and rules surrounding video games. If you do not have this, it would be very wise to consult with a psychologist or counsellor to find common ground prior to proceeding with a treatment plan. Also, see page 133 for a few thoughts on talking with a spouse or partner who does not view excessive video game play as problematic.

Psychologists vs. counsellors vs. therapists

If, despite your best attempts your child remains addicted to video games, is potentially violent, has additional mental health or emotional difficulties, expresses suicidal thoughts, or if your partner does not support your approach, how do you find a suitable mental health professional?

As a general guideline, I recommend working with a licensed psychologist. I recognize that I may be somewhat biased in this regard, but choosing a registered psychologist does provide an extra level of protection and standard of care that may not be present with those who go by other titles. Specifically, the designation of “psychologist” is tightly controlled and regulated by organizations such as the American Psychological Association, as well as state and provincial licensing boards. Unless one possesses the necessary degree (typically a Ph.D. in psychology), training, education, supervision, experience, and knowledge base he / she cannot represent him/herself as a psychologist. Psychologists must also follow comprehensive guidelines for ethical practice and because their actions are governed by licensing boards, clients have clear avenues to register complaints and concerns for questionable practice – thus helping to ensure that those who call themselves “psychologists” are providing an acceptable level of care and are doing so in an ethical manner.

In contrast, *anyone* can call him or herself a “counsellor”, “therapist”, “life coach”, “psychotherapist”, etc. These titles are not regulated. They require no specific training, education, or experience. Practices are not bound by clear ethical guidelines as there is no licensing board to report to. Regardless of your background, you could literally set up practice tomorrow as a “therapist”.

Now, I want to make an important point here. Choosing to see a psychologist over someone with another title by no means guarantees that the treatment will be effective or helpful. I know that there are many competent, ethical, and very effective mental health professionals who call themselves “counsellors” or “therapists”. In fact, if you do choose to go with a counsellor or therapist, check to see if they are registered with any regulating body (such as the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, or the American Counseling Association). If so, this does signify that they have completed the necessary requirements to be registered with this particular organization and they must uphold applicable standards of practice. Just keep in mind that unlike the designation of “psychologist” (which *requires* certain practice standards and registrations), someone with the title of “counsellor” or “therapist” *may* have a graduate degree in psychology or counselling and be registered with a governing body...but it is also possible that he / she has not completed high school and has no training whatsoever.

So to summarize, choosing to work with a psychologist over another mental health professional certainly does not guarantee effective treatment, but in my opinion it does increase the *likelihood* that you will end up working with someone who has the necessary skills to assist you.

How do I get a referral to a psychologist?

You do not need a referral to see a private practice psychologist (i.e., someone working independently outside of a hospital or government agency). In most cases you can simply make a call to his or her office and request an initial consultation. But, there are a few additional points to consider:

- Unless you happen to know someone who is already working with a good psychologist (word of mouth is often the best indicator of quality care), a family doctor is almost always a possible referral source. If you briefly discuss your concerns about your child with your family physician he /she may be familiar with a psychologist who works with video game addictions, or at the very least, young people experiencing problematic habits or behaviors. The physician may also be able to recommend someone who would be a good match personality-wise with you, your child, and your goals for therapy.
- If you do not have a specific recommendation from a friend or professional, your next best option is to find the website of your state or provincial association of psychologists. On these websites you will usually find a listing of most of the psychologists in private practice, a description of their theoretical orientation, their approach to therapy, and the types of issues they specialize in. You may be able to narrow your search based on location, gender, education, and areas of practice. Ideally, you are looking for someone who lists video game or online addiction as an area of specialty. The treatment of video game and internet addiction is very new to the psychological community, but requests for help are growing with each passing day. Five years ago it would have been very difficult to find a psychologist who had any experience treating video game addiction and virtually impossible to find one who specialized in this form of treatment. Today however, the number of specialists is growing and many psychologists are gaining experience working with children and teens who are addicted to video games. You may have to make a few phone calls but it is possible to find a psychologist who is comfortable working with video game addictions.
- If you do find a psychologist who lists video game addiction as an area of practice, great! You should definitely consider making a call and asking a few further questions (see the next section on page 127 for a list of specific questions to ask). But, what if *no one* lists video game addiction as a treatment area? What should you look for instead? In general, you *may* wish to look for someone who:

- **Is comfortable working with other forms of addiction** – gambling addiction in particular. Compared to alcohol or drug addiction, the psychological principals underlying excessive gambling behaviors are more similar to those underlying video game addictions. Also, the techniques used to treat gambling addiction may be more easily modified to help those addicted to video games.

- **Is younger and perhaps more familiar with the technology involved with online and console gaming** – even if he / she does not specialize in helping those addicted to video games. Choosing a younger psychologist certainly does not guarantee that he / she will be familiar with the technology, but a psychologist in his / her 30s may be more likely to be knowledgeable in this area. Keep in mind that you may sacrifice valuable experience by choosing a younger psychologist. Still, I do believe that it is important that your psychologist has at least a basic understanding of modern video games. This will go a way in gaining credibility with your child (something that is very important for effective treatment) and should help during the initial rapport-building stages of the relationship.

- **Specializes in working with children and young adults** (i.e., a child and adolescent psychologist).

- **Takes video game addiction seriously** and does not automatically dismiss it as the expression of a deeper underlying problem.

- **Practices primarily from a cognitive-behavioral orientation.** In brief, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that relies heavily on empirical validation, challenging unhealthy thought processes, and implementing behavioral interventions. To date, CBT has generally been considered the treatment modality of choice for video game addiction.

What questions should I ask when contacting a psychologist?

Now that you have a referral from a friend, professional, or have a list of possibilities from your state or provincial association of psychologists, it is time to make contact. What questions should you ask and how do you know if he / she has the experience and approach you are looking for?

Ideally, you will want to briefly speak with the psychologist on the phone before booking your first appointment. However, some psychologists choose not to speak with potential clients before an in-person meeting (for liability concerns and other reasons), so this is not always possible.

“Hello my name is _____. I am calling to enquire about the services provided by Dr. _____. I am considering booking an appointment but I do have a few questions first. Is Dr. _____ available to talk for a few minutes?”

If he / she is available and is willing to talk, proceed with the questions below. If he / she is unavailable but would be willing to talk at a later time, ask about a better time to call back. If he / she prefers not to speak over the phone, ask the receptionist if it is OK to ask him / her a few questions (it should be) and proceed with the questions below. Note that a receptionist will be able to provide *facts* about the psychologist (for example, the first question asking if he / she has experience working with video game addictions), but will not be able to provide *opinions* (for example, the second question asking about his / her views on video game addiction).

First, provide a brief (less than a minute) overview of your situation and concerns. Next ask:

Question	Ideal Response	Notes
Do you have experience working with video game or internet addiction?	Yes.	Even better if he / she has several years experience and has helped multiple clients with this problem.
In your opinion, can video game addiction be a real problem or is it just an expression of some other difficulty?	Yes, it can be a real problem. Occasionally, it can also be an expression of other difficulties. But, until I have met your child it is hard for me to know exactly what may be true in his situation.	What you are looking for here is a psychologist who has an open mind about video game addiction.

Question	Ideal Response	Notes
<p>Would it be possible for me to meet with you for a consultation before bringing my child in?</p>	<p>Yes.</p>	<p>I recommend that you meet with the potential psychologist prior to booking a session for your child. This allow you to describe your concerns in detail, get his / her feedback, learn about treatment plans, and get a sense of whether there is likely to be a good personality match with your child.</p>
<p>Do you just work with the child or do you also include family members?</p>	<p>Sometimes I work with the child, sometimes I work with the parents, and sometimes I work with the whole family. It depends on what is most helpful.</p>	<p>If your child is older (16 +), the psychologist may be more reluctant to include you in the sessions. However, if you are the parent of a younger child, the psychologist should occasionally include you in the sessions or be willing to have separate individual appointments.</p>
<p>How long does treatment normally last?</p>	<p>It's hard for me to answer this question because I do not know all the details of your situation yet.</p>	<p>This is more of a “screening out” than a “screening in” question. Reconsider going with someone who states that it will take X number of sessions before meeting you.</p>
<p>What is your theoretical orientation?</p>	<p>Mostly cognitive-behavioral. But depending on the presenting problem and the client I am comfortable working from a variety of treatment approaches.</p>	<p>As noted above, CBT is most often recommended for treating video game addiction. But this should not be your most important selection criterion. In my opinion, personality match, experience, warmth, and openness to working with video game addictions are more important.</p>

Question	Ideal Response	Notes
What are your fees?		This will depend on practice guidelines for your area. You should be able to find the recommended range on the website for your local psychologists' association. His or her fees should be within this range.
Do you accept my insurance coverage?	Yes.	You may also want to ask if you pay upfront or if the claim is submitted for you, but this is a relatively minor point.
I am only available on <u>days of the week</u> and <u>time of day</u> , do you have office hours during these times?	Yes.	Make sure that the psychologist is available when you are!
When is your first available appointment?	Within the next two weeks.	How long are you willing to wait? You may have to wait a month or more to see a well established psychologist. If you feel very good about this person but he / she is not available right away, you could ask about a cancellation list. If you would like to be seen sooner, ask if he / she has any suitable referrals for faster service.

What should I do if I do not agree with the approach taken by the psychologist?

Adults receiving psychotherapy are typically assured that the session content will be confidential unless the psychologist has reason to believe that he / she is at risk for significant self-harm, a danger to others, or if a child or elderly person is at risk.

If your child is a minor, confidentiality in therapy is considerably more relaxed. Although you should try to respect your child's privacy whenever possible, the psychologist will likely be willing to discuss his progress and how he is responding to interventions.

When your child is in therapy, honest and open communication with your psychologist is very important. The psychologist should be interested in getting updates from you and hearing any concerns you may have. In turn, you should feel comfortable expressing these concerns and provide honest feedback on how your child is doing.

Occasionally though, the match between therapist, client, and issue will be less than ideal. Effective therapy requires a great deal a trust from the client and respect from the psychologist. If either of these conditions are missing, the relationship will suffer and progress will be very slow. Keep in mind that I am mostly talking about the *match* between client and therapist, not assigning blame to either party. Therapy has sometimes been compared to dancing – although one person may take the lead, both partners must be listening to the same music for the dance to be possible. With this in mind, what are the signs that you should look for a different psychologist or therapist to work with?

- You are *promised* specific results (“I can get him to voluntarily quit video games within one month”).
- You are not asked for your opinions or thoughts on how therapy is going.
- You have no opportunities to meet with the psychologist by yourself.
- You are spoken to in a disrespectful, disparaging, or insulting manner.
- Your psychologist will not consider your ideas or read information that you provide.
- Your psychologist refuses to specifically address video game addiction as an area for intervention.
- Your psychologist is very evasive when you ask about a specific treatment plan.
- You see very little or no progress after several months of therapy.

- Your psychologist knows very little about the world of video games and does not seem interested in learning.
- Your psychologist advises you that you should let your child play video games as much as he wants (yes, I have seen this!).
- Your psychologist suggests physical punishment for disobedience (this is *not* an effective way to treat addiction).
- Your psychologist underestimates the addiction and oversimplifies the solution (“This isn’t complicated... just take away the game.”)
- Your psychologist suggests that “he will grow out of it”.
- Your psychologist does not take your concerns seriously (“I wouldn’t worry too much, most kids play video games these days.”)

Obviously, the more of these points that apply to you, the more you should think about looking for another therapist. Before doing so though, talk honestly and openly to your psychologist about your concerns. Some of the issues may be resolvable and there is the possibility that miscommunications or misunderstandings can be corrected.

If you are convinced that your child’s difficulties are primarily centered around video game addiction, but your psychologist seems uninformed about how serious excessive play can be, consider printing some articles on video game addiction and asking him/her to have a look. A psychologist who is committed to helping you and working with you should not be offended by this request! These stories are very easy to find online. For example, one person’s account of video game addiction can be found [here](#), while hundreds more can be found at the parents section of the [Online Gamers Anonymous message boards](#). At the very least, you deserve to work with someone who can accept the possibility that excessive gaming is a real problem that deserves attention – even if other problems simultaneously co-exist. We know that alcoholism rarely exists without a host of other difficulties, but how many treatment programs advocate treating *only* these other problems and then waiting for the alcoholism to resolve itself? The same is true for video game addiction – it can and should be part of a comprehensive treatment approach.

Remember that ultimately, you are paying for this treatment. As such, you have the freedom to take your business elsewhere if reasonable expectations for service are not being met.

Note: If your older adolescent (16+) is *motivated* to develop healthier habits but is not willing to see a psychologist, the Computer, Internet, & Video Game Addiction Workbook is available for instant download [here](#).

Other Books and Resources

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

The guide you are reading right now was a response to the general lack of straightforward and practical books for parents on the topic of video game addiction. I have attempted to include information and strategies that will be helpful to *most* parents struggling with their child's video game addiction. Furthermore, I am committed to keeping this manual updated with the latest resources, information, and helpful interventions (which is one of the advantages of distributing it via an eBook format).

However, other works have been published on video game addictions in children, and depending on your particular situation, they may offer helpful information that is not covered in this manual. For example, you have likely noticed that this manual is more focused on assessment, treatment, and intervention than on research and the various theories of video game addiction. This was intentional and based on feedback from parents who stated that they preferred not to have yet another book laden with scientific jargon, less than helpful chapters on the history of video games and behavioral psychology, and written in the style of a journal article or academic textbook on general child psychology. I did not want to write a book in which the actual treatment is relegated to a few vague points in the last chapter. Parents have informed me that although the question "How does video game addiction develop?" is important...they are more interested in answering the question "What can I *do* to get my child back?"

If you are interested in video game addiction research, behavioral psychology, the physiology of addiction, lengthier debates on the inclusion of video game addiction as a clinical diagnosis, and the various theories of addiction, these books and journal articles do exist and may provide interesting or helpful information.

Additionally, there have been several good books written on the topic of child and adolescent video game addiction that are worth reading for additional information not covered in this workbook:

- 1) [Video Game Play and Addiction: A Guide for Parents](#)
Kourosh Dini
- 2) [Plugged In: A Clinicians' and Families' Guide to Online Video Game Addiction](#)
Terry Waite
- 3) [Game Addiction: The Experience and the Effects](#)
Neils Clark
- 4) [Video Games & Your Kids: How Parents Stay in Control](#)
Hilarie Cash

Finally, a list of recommended readings from OLGA members can be found [here](#).

When your Spouse or Partner does not take Video Game Addiction Seriously

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Back on page 123, I referred to the challenge when one parent or caregiver is concerned about their child's video game habits and wants to make changes, but the other partner does not see a problem. In this situation the more lenient parent will almost always have more influence over the child's gaming habits. It is very easy for a child to determine which parent is more permissive with regard to gaming and will default to this person's rules when the more concerned parent attempts to enforce limits. This is not a recipe for a successful intervention, and is counterproductive for effective parenting in general.

There are three main combinations of partner agreement and support.

- 1) **Both partners agree that the child's video game habits are problematic and support new rules and limits.** If both parents agree that the gaming habits are excessive and together create rules and consequences for violations, this greatly increases the probability of a successful intervention.

- 2) **Only one parent believes that the child's video game habits are problematic, but the other is still willing to support new rules and limits.** This is less desirable, but a situation in which your partner does not *agree* with your concerns, but is willing to follow and enforce the rules that you set is still workable. As long as he / she does not indicate to your child that he disagrees with the new rules, the interventions can be successful.

- 3) **Only one parent believes that the child's video game habits are problematic, and only this parent is willing to enforce new rules and limits.** In this scenario, your efforts to intervene are unlikely to be successful. Before going forward with new rules, expectations, and consequences for breaking rules, you must work to gain the support of your partner.

A few suggestions on how to do this:

- The most direct way to gain the support of your partner is to communicate this need and ask for his or her assistance. Although this suggestion may seem obvious, many couples have difficulty with the honest communication necessary to gain the support of another. Your goal is not to "trick" your partner into supporting you, but the way you communicate this need will influence his or her willingness to do so. Although the situation and personalities of every couple will differ, the following script may provide some guidance for the general tone and direction of the message:

“Well, as you already know, I’m really worried about our son. I know that he loves playing video games, but I just don’t think that the amount of time that he plays is healthy. I know that most kids his age play games – I know that it can be normal, relatively harmless, and fun. But the more I think about it, the more I see that it isn’t harmless for *him*. His grades have dropped, he doesn’t see his friends much anymore, and he rarely leaves the house. I’m worried about him. If he could keep his play under control maybe I wouldn’t have such a problem with it, but he just doesn’t seem to be able to do this. I’ve been doing some research on kids who play video games too much and it scares me when I read some of the stories. I want to believe that it is harmless but I know this isn’t true. I even filled out a questionnaire on healthy video game habits and it said that _____ . When I read the stories of other parents and how they lost control, I see the same thing happening with our son (show printouts if you have them). The other parents usually say their biggest mistake was not acting sooner to get the gaming under control. I don’t want to end up saying the same thing. I need to help him, but I can’t do it without you. Can we talk about setting up some new rules and limits for his play time?”

NOTES:

- This conversation should take place when both partners are calm, in a relatively good mood, and at a time when they are unlikely to be interrupted.
- The parent focuses on how he/she feels about the situation and does not presume that his/her partner feels the same way. He/she avoids telling the other person how to feel and how to react. The parent uses “I statements” (e.g., “I am concerned”, “I need to help him”), not “You statements” (“You should be concerned”, “You need to help him”). You will have far more success if you focus on your own feelings (which are difficult for your partner to argue against) than if you tell your partner what he should be thinking or doing (which is very easy for him or her to argue against and can easily create an adversarial environment).
- The parent acknowledges that her son enjoys playing games and that enforcing new rules is not an easy decision to make.
- The parent acknowledges that some people are able to play within their limits but unfortunately his/her son does not seem to be able to do so.
- The parent specifically lists how excessive gaming is negatively impacting the child’s life.
- Prior to having the conversation, the parent has done his or her homework and is familiar with issues involving unhealthy gaming.
- The parent states “I am scared”. If this is true in your situation, use these words. It is a very powerful phrase and can increase the likelihood of gaining the support you need.

- The parent refers to the stories of others who have battled video game addictions in their children. He/she has printed out several relevant stories before the conversation.
 - The parent states that many others regret not acting sooner in similar situations.
 - The parent does not use the term “video game addiction”. You can use it if you like, but doing so can occasionally put you on the defensive and sidetrack the conversation. You do not want to defend a term that is not officially recognized as a disorder. Your goal is to have your partner consider excessive gameplay as a problem, not necessarily a “disorder”.
 - The parent states that he/she “needs” to help him, but that she cannot do it without the support of the other person.
 - The parent asks for help in establishing new rules and limitations.
- As mentioned above, it is generally a good idea to search for a few stories on video game addiction in children and teens, especially those that are similar to your situation. At [Online Gamers Anonymous](#), you can find many accounts from parents of just how destructive this problem can be. It is best to actually print out the stories and provide them to your partner rather than instruct him/her to find them online (which is too easy to disregard, ignore or “forget” if one is not motivated to learn more).
 - If your partner is reluctant to enforce rules, consider presenting the new limits as “an experiment”. Use the Intervention Summary worksheet (see page 211) to clearly outline the conditions of the experiment. Propose a specific time commitment to try the new rules and interventions (e.g., for one month). After this time you, your partner, and your child agree to review how the experiment went, whether it should continue, or how it should be modified.
 - Although you may feel very passionate about enforcing strict new rules and implementing techniques to help your child overcome his video game addiction, consider compromising on some of the interventions if it means gaining the support of your partner. For example, if your child is currently gaming three hours per night, you may wish to limit it to one hour. However, perhaps you encounter resistance from your partner and he / she is very reluctant to enforce a one hour limit. Rather than go forward without your partner’s support, I believe it is far better to work towards a compromise that he *can* support. For example, a 90 minute time limit with your partner’s support is preferable to a 60 minute time limit without his or her support – would this be acceptable? Again, remember that these rules can be reevaluated as necessary or can be experimented with for a month and then reviewed.

- If in the past, your partner has requested *your* support for an issue unrelated to video games and you were reluctant to support him or her, reconsider this request in exchange for support on new video game limits and restrictions. For example, the father of one family I worked with had, for years, wanted his son to try hockey (the son wished to play as well). However, the mother was reluctant to let her son join a local league and would not let her son play a sport she perceived as violent. With regard to video game play, the father was reluctant to yet again deny his son an activity that he enjoyed. The solution seems obvious doesn't it? With some work and education (on both hockey and video games) the father was willing to support tighter controls and restrictions on video games if his wife was willing to let their son try hockey. We then had a united team that was committed to enforcing video game limits, a father who has gained the support of his wife for something that he was very passionate about, and a mother who actually *enjoyed* going to her son's games. Most importantly, they had a son, who after a few very difficult first weeks of enforced video game restrictions was playing in moderation and was active in something other than gaming.

- Ask your spouse or partner to complete the Video Game Addiction Assessment Questionnaire found on page 43. Yes, it is possible (likely?) that he/she will not get the same results that you did. This is fine. Even if your partner does not consider your child's video game habits to be as problematic as you do, completing the questionnaire will still require him/her to examine his behavior in detail and perhaps reconsider a previous evaluation. Also, you will be able to compare where you and your partner agree and disagree – which can be very helpful for better communication and when creating new rules and limits together.

- If a general lack of communication (or poor communication) with your partner is an issue in your marriage or partnership, this may be an opportunity to work on this important aspect of your relationship. This may be best addressed in couple's therapy (see the next bullet point) but if you would prefer to work on it only as a couple, I can recommend either of following two books:

[The Power of Two: Secrets of a Strong & Loving Marriage](#)

Susan Heitler

(Best for couples who prefer to read on their own)

[The Power of Two Workbook](#)

Susan Heitler

(Best for couples who prefer read and complete exercises together)

- Finally, if you are unable to gain the support of your spouse or partner thorough any of the approaches above, consider booking a consultation with a psychologist or counsellor. This does not have to be a long term commitment, and depending on the complexity of the issues, may only require a couple of sessions. Again, I *strongly* recommend that you have the support of your partner before initiating any interventions or establishing new rules for your child.

Relax Rules in Other Areas

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Whenever you ask someone to give something up, it is usually best to offer something in return (when possible). Is this bribery? Not in my opinion. An example of bribery would be promising your child he will get an a few extra dollars for his allowance if he goes to bed right away. When introducing tighter restrictions on video games, offering to relax parental rules in other areas can be seen as you acknowledging the difficult task that awaits your child...and an expression of your appreciation for his co-operation.

Keep in mind that you are not offering a “this for that” deal (“*If* you promise to cut back on gaming, you can...”). New rules limits for video games *will* be in place *regardless* of your offer. Whether your child decides to take this offer is up to him, but new gaming rules will still be enforced.

What you are offering is an incentive for his co-operation, not his compliance. If he does not comply, you will enforce consequences / punishments (see page 171). If he does comply without too much resistance, you can *reward* his co-operation. Just as withdrawing privileges is the preferred punishment for non-compliance, expanding privileges in other areas can be an effective reward for his co-operation.

For example...

To show appreciation for their 16-year-old son’s co-operation with new gaming limits (i.e., abiding by rules with minimal complaints), a family may decide to extend his weekend curfew by 30 minutes. If he has demonstrated appropriate responsibility in the past and the family has little reason to worry about him being out an extra half hour, this would seem to be an reasonable gesture – and would probably be very much appreciated by the son.

Of course, you should offer an incentive for co-operation that you and your partner agree on, is age-appropriate, and makes sense for your child. Try a quick brainstorming activity – which rules in other areas would you consider relaxing if he routinely co-operates with new gaming limits? Also, when the time comes, it may be a good idea to ask your child for ideas as well!

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

Reward Cooperation

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

For various reasons, some parents are reluctant to relax rules for their children in other areas as a reward for cooperation with new rules. They view a video game addiction intervention as an opportunity to regain control with their child, not lose it even more. This is a justifiable concern for some parents and the relaxation of other rules may not be appropriate for your particular situation. Furthermore, some families are in the very difficult position of already having very few enforced rules for their children. The balance of power in the home has slowly slipped away from the parents to the point where the child answers only to himself. In these cases, there are very few rules available to relax as a reward for cooperation. Clearly, it is not advisable to give a child more freedom if he is already taking advantage of the freedom he has.

So, if parents are reluctant to relax other rules as a reward for cooperation with new limits on video games, what other options do they have?

- First, recognize that it is not absolutely *necessary* to reward cooperation (at least with regard to the typical notion of “reward”). As a parent, you have to make many difficult choices and at times, you need your child to follow a rule not because he agrees with it or understands it, but because you care about him and it is in his best interest (especially over time).
- Not dismissing the previous point, I do think it is very important to *appropriately* reward cooperation with your rules (the key word being “appropriately”). In my view, the most appropriate reward you can give is also the easiest and most affordable – praise. Whenever you have the chance to praise your child for following your new rules, do it! Remember that you have asked him to significantly cut back (or give up) something that he loves. Gaming may also be filling a psychological, social or emotional need (although much like eating junk food when you are hungry, this is not a healthy way to satisfy these needs). Try not to forget that you are asking him to do something that is *very* difficult. He is *addicted*. Therefore, if he quietly stops playing with little or no resistance when you inform him that his time has expired, make an extra effort to praise him for this. An appropriate response may be:

“Thank you for stopping when I asked you to. I know that this isn’t easy for you, so I really appreciate it when you try really hard to follow the rules. I’m proud of you.”

Although simple, this empathic and honest comment will be very reinforcing for your child and should encourage continued cooperation.

- Occasionally, parents wish to offer more tangible rewards in return for cooperation. Although praise is the preferred reward for cooperation, external rewards can be helpful if used with care. If you do decide to offer other incentives for cooperation, keep the following points in mind:
 - Rewards are offered for cooperation, not simply for the absence of playing. For example, imagine that time has expired and you ask your child to stop playing. Rather than cooperating, he is rude, yells, and starts arguing with you. Eventually he turns the game off. Even though he has complied with your request (which is the most important thing to remember), he should not be rewarded for this type of compliance. He is only rewarded when he complies with no (or minimal) complaining.
 - Under no circumstances should money be the reward for cooperation.
 - Upgraded computer equipment, new games, or new consoles should not be offered as rewards.
 - Praise should be the primary reward you offer (i.e., 95% of the time). Do not create a scenario in which you must provide a tangible reward every time he cooperates with your request. If you do so, you have unintentionally created a fixed ratio schedule of reinforcement (reward is offered after every appropriate response). The problem with this system is that the good behavior will persist only as long as the rewards continue – which is clearly not sustainable over time.
 - Tangible rewards, if offered, should be for consistent cooperation over time (i.e., long-term rewards). For example, if your child shows steady improvement over a one month period (improvement may be defined as meeting weekly goals for reduction as found on page 87 with minimal opposition), you may decide to reward his effort. Parents may also choose to offer incentives at the six month and one year points. Possible rewards (with the exceptions of money and video game equipment) will largely depend on your child's interests and what you as a parent consider acceptable. Ideally, rewards should encourage activities that parents would prefer over gaming. Keep in mind that external rewards are not a necessary component of beating video game addiction. But if you do choose to use them, they should be offered as a gesture of your pride and to encourage healthier activities...not as the primary motivation to cut back or give up video games. That is, you should not promise your son a new car if he quits playing video games, but something like an iTunes gift card may be appropriate for good progress at one month.

“Family” Rules

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

When possible, you should create rules around healthy gaming and online use that apply to *all* family members. Now, this does not mean that you need to put tight restrictions in place for a sibling who is doing well in school, is involved in other activities, and only plays a bit too much on rare occasions. But, a general rule such as “no video games until after homework is complete”, is a healthy practice and could be applied to all children in the home.

Again, when possible these rules should apply to everyone in the family – yes, including parents! You will have much greater “buy-in” and your child will have fewer reasons to claim “It’s not fair” if you and your spouse or partner live by the same rules. For example, family rules may include no video games for anyone until after dinner and a daily limit of 1.5 hours of online entertainment for all family members. That is, you and your spouse may not play video games, but how much time do you spend online surfing the web for entertainment purposes, chatting, using Facebook, etc.? Yes, *your* online time is probably not a concern (although with some of the families I have worked with it certainly has been). But, if modeling healthy online behaviors helps your child overcome the addiction and recognize the importance of healthy limits, is this not worth the sacrifice? Many parents also spend too much time online...does this apply to you? If so, the introduction of new rules for your child is the perfect opportunity to examine and address your own healthy limits.

The counter-productiveness of a statement like “Do as I say, not as I do” applies just as much to online use as it does to smoking, drinking, and drug use. Your child will have more motivation (and less resentment) if he can look to you as someone who models appropriate online behavior and healthy self-control.

The Talk: Informing your Child that New Rules are Coming

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

It is time to talk to your child about new rules and limits for video games after you have:

- Completed this workbook (remember to thoroughly read the entire manual one time while checking (✓) the items that you would consider trying, and then reviewing these points again to decide on a final list)
- Worked on gaining the support of your spouse or partner
- Decided on appropriate limits, rules, rewards for co-operation, and punishments for non-compliance
- Installed any software or hardware solutions
- Completed your Intervention Plan Summary (see page 220)
- Ruled out the possibility that your child has additional mental health, emotional, or social problems that require more help than you alone can provide
- Ruled out the possibility that your child will become violent or suicidal
- Completed any additional forms, worksheets, and plans (e.g., see the gaming contract on page 223)

Although I have provided a sample “talk” below, the content of your discussion (similar to the conversation to gain the support of your spouse or partner) will depend on many other factors such as the age of your child, his developmental level, the quality of your relationship with him, the extent of the problem, and other relevant issues. That is, you can use the sample below to get a general sense of what you may wish to communicate to your child, but it is unlikely to perfectly fit your situation.

“So, I need to talk to you about the games that you play on the computer. Unfortunately, you probably won’t like everything that I have to say or the things I need you to do. I love you very much and I know you enjoy playing – which is why this is hard for me to do.

I need you to cut back on how much you play.

I’m worried about you because (school, friends, health, mood) and we need to have some healthier rules around playing video games. I’ve asked you to cut back in the past, but it hasn’t really been enforced. Your father (or mother) and I have been talking about this a

lot and we *will* be making some real changes this time. We have a few ideas such as no video games until after homework and keeping play to an hour per night, but we wanted to hear your thoughts before we make the final rules. These rules won't go into effect for another week and we are interested in what you have to say."

Notes:

- The parent acknowledges that his/her child enjoys playing.
- The parent states he/she loves the child.
- The parent uses the word "need" several times.
- The parent states that he/she is worried about the child.
- Both parents (if applicable) should talk to the child, support each other, and present a unified front.
- If your child gives you feedback right away (as is quite likely), listen to him (even if his comments are not overly constructive) and let him know that you will talk to him about the final rules within a day or two (after you have had some time to think about what he said). Again, this should not be a long debate about the "fairness" of new rules - the rules *will* be in place in one week, but this is his first opportunity to have his say on the matter.
- Do not expect his feedback to be positive. The restriction of gaming time and new rules for play will not be good news to the addiction and it will start to defend itself immediately. Stay strong – this is not a time to backtrack or give in!
- If your child becomes very upset or angry, try to remain calm yourself. You have put a lot of thought and energy into this process – your only goals at this point are to give him the message and listen to what he child has to say, *not* to convince him that it is the right thing to do. Other than restating that you *need* to do this because he has not demonstrated that he can play within healthy limits, do not apologize for taking these actions! You provide the message that new rules will be in place, he is given the opportunity respond, you listen to his response, and then, you let him know that final rules will be decided on shortly. Remember, this should be a short talk, not a debate.
- During this initial interaction, some parents say that they are "thinking" about reducing gameplay to one hour per night (for example), when in fact they would accept a reduction to 1.5 hours. Obviously, this is in anticipation of their child not being happy with such a reduction...and then being able to "compromise" to 1.5 hours when the final rules are set. Yes, this is a bit sneaky, but it can be an effective strategy.

- Also, during the first talk hold back on describing how this will be a *gradual* reduction over the next 5 weeks. Again, the initial conversation is used to present a broad overview of the bad news (from his perspective), give him some time to be upset, and some time to calm down. The second talk when the final rules are set (which should happen within the next two days) is an opportunity to lessen the impact of first talk and increase his acceptance of the plan. That is, you can say that you did some more thinking and would be willing to settle on 1.5 hours per night (your initial goal anyway) and that it will be a gradual reduction over the next month rather than an immediate cutback (use your schedule from page 87 here).
- The initial talk is used to present “ideas” about video game reduction and let the child know that changes will be coming. The time in between talks is used to let the child calm down a bit and hopefully begin to accept the changes. The second meeting is used to soften the impact of the first talk by presenting rules that may not be as harsh as the child assumed.
- When you go over the actual rules and plans during the second talk, present only the rules and limitations that you *initially* plan to implement. That is, there may be many points / suggestions in this manual that you have ticked, but have decided not to use unless necessary. For example, a simple gradual reduction over one month combined with *consistently* enforced punishments (e.g., removal of other privileges), rewards (e.g., relaxation of other rules), and expectations (e.g., homework before video games) may be an appropriate way to start. Give your child a chance to succeed before introducing more drastic measures (e.g., hardware or software to control access). If after several weeks he is showing no evidence that he can abide by the initial rules, consider introducing more drastic methods of limiting gaming time. Also, remember that complete removal of the game (see page 187 onward) may be necessary.
- Use the workspace below to note the rules and limitations you plan to tell your child about during the first talk (i.e., the rules you are “thinking about”). Avoid adding more restrictions during the second talk that were not previously mentioned, as this largely defeats the effectiveness of the first talk. You can use the more detailed intervention summary on page 220 to guide your second talk and for general reference.

Rules and Limitations: First Talk

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

Find Support Online

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

I previously discussed how gaining the support of your spouse or partner would increase the chances of your intervention strategies being effective. With regard to the word “support”, I was mostly referring to your partner acknowledging that your child’s video game habits are excessive and agreeing to enforce new rules and limits on play. Of course, it is also very important that you find emotional support during this potentially challenging intervention. Ideally, this will primarily come from your partner, other family members, or close friends. However, for various reasons this is not always possible (you may not currently be in a relationship, perhaps you are physically separated from your family, etc.). Also, the concept of video game addiction may be very foreign to your family and friends and they may have difficulty understanding the challenges you are facing.

Thankfully, there are places where you can find other parents who are also trying to help a child who is addicted to video games. While this is unlikely to be a physical location (unless you live in a very large city, in-person support groups for parents of video game addicts are very rare), there are several very helpful online support groups. For example, if you have not already registered and introduced yourself at [Online Gamers Anonymous](#) (OLGA - specifically, the parents forum), I *highly* recommend doing so *before* you begin your intervention. In addition to gaining emotional support, participating in a message board for parents of addicted children may also allow you to find out what has worked for parents in situations similar to yours. Although you may believe that you must face this challenge alone, this is not true. In my experience, most families find the parents at Online Gamers Anonymous very welcoming, supportive, knowledgeable, and helpful.

You may find that the users at OLGA skew towards the abstinence approach (i.e., completely removing certain games or banning video games entirely). That is, if you write that you are trying to encourage / enforce moderation, you may get feedback stating that this cannot be done. Keep in mind that what is true for others may not necessarily be true for you. That being said, these parents are speaking from experience and many have tried for months or years to encourage moderation with little success. After several attempts at moderation using different approaches and techniques, you may also conclude that moderation is not possible for your child. If you decide to ban access completely, you will almost certainly gain helpful support and advice at OLGA.

Ignore the Questionable Advice from Well-Meaning Individuals

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

As much as I have stressed the importance of talking and consulting with others about your child's video game addiction, be wary of well-intended individuals who may not offer the best advice (this includes friends, family, online connections, and at times, professionals).

On many occasions, it has been my experience that parents actually *know* what they need to do, but have difficulty initiating or committing to the steps they need to take. That is, their instincts about what has to be done for their child are often very accurate. Learn to trust these instincts on *most* occasions. Although it is very important to talk to others about your situation, if you talk to enough people eventually you will get some pretty bad advice. Below I have provided some of the more common pieces of advice that you should probably think twice about before following.

“At least he is not using drugs.”

Yes, it is good if your child is not using drugs. However, just because one addiction is not as destructive as another, does not mean that it ceases to be a problem. Most people probably view alcohol addiction as more damaging overall than gambling addiction. Nevertheless, gambling addiction can be a very serious problem and can lead to lost relationships, careers, and of course, significant financial difficulties. Try not to minimize a significant problem by concluding that “It could be worse.”

“It's just a phase.”

Yes, some children and teens dramatically reduce their gaming time as they get older (some stop playing completely). But, others continue to play excessively and some start to play even more. Are you willing to take this risk? Also, “phases” can last for years and can result in significant harm during this very important period of development. Can your child afford to have a video game addiction phase that lasts for several years? Could this affect not only the period of addiction, but also the years that follow?

“Don't worry, most children play video games these days.”

Yes, almost [all children play video games](#) at least occasionally. Furthermore, most children and adults keep their play times within reasonable limits. For many, gaming is a harmless and enjoyable activity to relax, reduce stress, or be entertained. But, there are [also those who play games far too much](#) and this significantly interferes with healthy functioning in other areas of their life (e.g., school, relationships, work, and health). The argument is not whether it is *possible* to play responsibly (it is for most), but rather, whether *your* child is able to play in moderation. Most people are also able to drink in moderation, but some become addicted. The same rule is also true for video games.

“Let him play as much as he wants. If you restrict access it will only make him want to play more.”

Ah yes, the “forbidden fruit” argument. This bit of advice actually came from the previous therapist of one of my clients. I understand the logic behind this suggestion – a basic principal of consumer psychology is that if you tell someone they cannot have something (or if it is very rare), this will increase demand for the product or service. Do you remember when Gmail was first introduced and Google limited the number of available accounts and also made obtaining one by invitation only? By limiting access the demand for the service was, in all likelihood, dramatically increased. So yes, if you limit access to video games, your child may initially want to play even more. This is normal. At this stage, your primary goal as parent is to reduce how much he is *actually* playing, not to reduce how much he *wants* to play. There are countless things that your child may *want* to do, but obviously he cannot be *allowed* to do everything he desires. When video gaming has become excessive and destructive, I believe that it makes sense to intervene and to start reducing actual gaming time – rather than wait for the desire to decrease “in time”. Of course, it is important to also work on decreasing the desire to play, but this will come when the child starts to engage in other activities outside the gaming world. As long as he has unlimited access to video games, he is very unlikely to seek out or give these other activities a chance. Other activities will not suddenly appear without your help and “push away” his interest in gaming. Rather, video game addiction creates a barrier that prevents other activities from entering his life. Incidentally, the parents who followed the advice to let their child play as much as he wanted, reported that he went from playing 25 hours per week to 40 hours per week with no signs of slowing down.

“He needs to admit he is addicted before anything will change.”

No – this is simply not true for children and adolescents addicted to video games. Although admitting that he has a problem will make your interventions much easier and more likely to be successful, this is not a necessary condition for change. If we are talking about *adults* who are addicted to video games (or alcohol, or drugs, or gambling, etc.), there is wisdom in this statement. An adult is responsible for his or own self-care, making his or her own choices, and taking responsibility for the consequences of these choices. However, children and adolescents cannot be expected to fully appreciate or anticipate the long-term consequences of their decisions. They are dependent on their parents to make healthy (but not always easy) choices for them. Imagine if this same philosophy was applied to eating habits: “He needs to admit that candy is unhealthy before anything will change.” Few, if any, parents would agree that this is a reasonable approach to managing a child’s diet. They understand that given the opportunity, many children would choose to fill up on candy and snacks rather than eat a nutritious meal. As such, they take control and make healthier food choices for their children (usually). The same reasoning applies to video game addiction. Do not wait for your child to realize that he is wasting / ruining his life. You can make the necessary changes and you can do it now. Be as direct and as clear as possible:

“You are playing too much and this needs to change.”

Join your Child in Self-Improvement

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

As parents, it is often too easy to follow the mantra of “Do as I say, not as I do”. Needless to say, if you *also* play video games too much, this should change – both for your own benefit and so that you can serve as a role model for your child. When your child argues that his friends are allowed to play more than he can, you do not need to justify your rules compared to the rules of other families. However, if *you* also spend too much time playing video games, you lose credibility in the eyes of your child – and as such, this increases the likelihood of resistance. So, if you also play video games too much (be honest) look at this as an opportunity to also restore balance in your own life.

So right now you are probably thinking “No problem, I’m definitely not addicted to video games – I don’t even play. I’m covered here.”

Hold on...please do not move on to the next point just yet.

Even if you do not play video games, there is a lot to be said for taking a look at your own life for self-improvement areas. Several years ago I started asking the parents of children who are addicted to video games to choose something that *they* would like to simultaneously work on. This has proven to be a surprisingly successful intervention. By committing to your own area of self-improvement, you:

- Show your child that you understand how difficult it is for him to give up something he really enjoys
- Form somewhat of a team with your child – with both individuals working to overcome something that has been holding them back
- Send the message that you “practice what you preach”, and that there is always room for personal improvement – even as adults

“I want you to know that I’m trying to understand how hard this is for you. I know you enjoying playing and that cutting back is not easy. But as I’ve said before, I need you to do this. I have been thinking about this and I also want to make some changes in my life. As you know I (smoke too much, drink too much, do not exercise enough, eat too much unhealthy food, watch too much TV, swear too much, etc.). I’m asking you to change, and I want to change myself too.”

Are you ready to make a change in your own life? If so, consider joining your child with your own *realistic* goals for self improvement. However, if you are not committed to following through with these plans, do not make the offer. If you give up on your goals it will definitely send the wrong message to your child. This is a powerful technique but it can backfire if you are not ready to make the necessary changes.

Avoid Relying on Games to Entertain Your Child

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

This point is mainly applicable for children and younger teens. Some children are introduced to video games and develop unhealthy video game habits because parents are very busy and do not have much free time to spend with them. Although a lack of parental time is not a new development (past generations may have relied a bit too much on television as babysitters), many of today's parents are working even longer hours, have more responsibilities, and less caregiver support from the extended family. There is no question about it – parenting can be the most challenging and time-consuming task you will ever face. Hopefully though, it will also be the most rewarding. To achieve this reward though, you must at times interact with and engage your child's imagination even if you are struggling to find the time and energy to do so. Video games can be a convenient device for tired parents to gain a few precious moments of peace and relaxation. But if moments regularly turn into hours, an unhealthy trend of parental reliance on video games may have developed.

Believe it or not, many children and teens would rather spend time with their parents (doing something they enjoy of course) than play video games (especially if it has not reached the stage of serious addiction). How old is your child right now? I know that the following statement is so obvious that it is bordering on absurd, but recognize that he will never be this age again. Every moment that passes he is older, less of a child, and like billions before him, is faithfully following a developmental path towards greater independence from you. You have only 12 years to take in every possible moment of your son's childhood and only 8 years to watch him grow as an adolescent. This time will pass in the blink of an eye and sadly, you can never return to this period. This is all sounding rather depressing right now. But, the point I am trying to make is that although it is a cliché, we really must cherish the few short years we have with our children as *children*. Yes, we are all tired after a long day at work. Yes, at times we really need to just relax without having to "entertain" our kids. But please make it a point to start / keep creating special memories with your child. As an adult he will not look back and reminisce about the time he achieved level 70 on World of Warcraft or racked up thousands of achievement points on Xbox Live.

He will remember the time you went camping and stayed up late by the campfire.

He will remember Friday night movies and popcorn at home.

He will remember the time you built a fort out of all the pillows and cushions in the house.

He will remember trips to the park on Saturday afternoons.

He will remember that you sometimes took the time to play a few board games when he said "I have nothing to do".

Above all else, he will remember the time he spent with you. And if you do not make it a priority to spend time with him, he will remember this instead...

Introduce or Reinforce the Importance of Doing Chores at Home

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Most experts believe that children from age three onward can and should play some role in maintaining the family home (i.e. “chores”). Although some parents argue that children should only focus on schoolwork and “being a kid” I have to respectfully disagree and suggest that becoming a responsible member of the family is a very important developmental task of childhood.

Although chores are beneficial for a variety of reasons, with regard to video game addiction having these responsibilities again reinforces the concept that work must at times come before play (a lesson that is essential if one is to become a productive member of society). Specifically, it is reasonable for your child to have regular, age-appropriate responsibilities around the home. Completing these chores can then be included as one of the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for video game play. If his chores are not completed, gaming time is forfeited – really a very simple rule.

Note that simply completing chores does not automatically give him the right to play (see more on this in the next section). Rather, it satisfies just one of many conditions that must be met in order to have the *privilege* of playing (remember, gaming is a privilege, not a right).

Appropriate chores will obviously depend on the age and maturity level of your child. But as a general guideline you may ask a 6-year-old to help take care of pets, a 10-year-old to help with laundry, and a 16-year-old to occasionally prepare meals for the family.

Below, try to generate a few age-appropriate chores that must be routinely completed before your child is permitted to play video games. Unless you are very committed to a particular task, discuss the options with your child and allow him to decide on the chore(s) he would prefer to do.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

6) _____

Set School Grades as a Condition for Video Game Access

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

School grades and video game use are two issues that are inevitably tied together whenever parents initiate help for excessive gameplay. Parents typically report that their child was at least an average student, and in many cases, considerably above average. They often report that their child had an interest in games and technology at an early age, but that it seemed relatively harmless.

However, at some point the child “graduates” from single-player offline games to MMO or FPS games (often in the early years of adolescence). The parents may immediately notice an increase in the time their child spends playing the game, but do not notice significant changes in other areas of his life. He may still be socializing with friends, may still be participating in other activities, and his grades may generally be at the level they always were.

I like to refer to this as the “buffer effect”, and it is one of the reasons that video game addiction can be so insidious and can *seem* to come from out of nowhere. Prior to getting involved with the addictive game, the child or teen had been, for lack of a better term, participating in life. He had built peer relationships, had devoted time and energy to other activities (e.g., hobbies, interests, sports, clubs, etc.), and was invested in his academic work. When one starts to play games excessively, other components of life (relationships, school, and other interests) are not immediately destroyed. Friends will still call even if he does not seem to be as interested in going out. He may still participate in hobbies, activities, and clubs but will start to lose interest. His grades will not immediately reflect the decreasing amount of time he is investing in his studies. Typically, it is only after a full semester that decreased academic performance will be noted (often a drop of one letter grade). However, this will be explained as “just a bad semester – nothing to worry about”. Given his general history of better grades, parents often give their child the benefit of the doubt. In the back of their minds though, they wonder if the poor grades are related to how much time is spent playing video games. In the next semester, the child is clearly aware that he is not keeping up with his schoolwork. The beneficial buffer effect from *previous* academic investment is gone and he no longer building on what he had learned prior to becoming addicted to the game. His grades on tests, exams, and homework assignments continue to deteriorate throughout the semester. He may hide this fact from his parents and claim that “marks are not in yet”. Despite sacrificing important parts of his previous life so that he can continue to play video games, he no longer cares. When the *second* report card inevitably finds its way to parents it is finally clear that something is wrong and that it isn’t just a bad semester. By this point the child or adolescent is *already* very addicted to the game. The parents’ worries are now confirmed and they may feel guilty about not noticing it earlier (see page 96 on letting go of the guilt if this is true for you).

So how can you help him regain a healthier balance between grades and games? There are those who suggest rewarding good grades with an increase in allowable gaming time. For example, an A may be worth an extra hour per week, a B gives an extra 30 minutes, and so on.

I do not recommend this approach. Video games should *not* be used as a direct reward for attending to responsibilities. You want your child to develop internal motivation for dedication to a task, not dependence on an external reward. We know from several classic experiments in psychology that one's natural motivation for completing a task will significantly drop as soon as it is tied to an external reward. That is, an enjoyable task with no reward (for example, completing a puzzle) will no longer be enjoyable if a reward (e.g., a small amount of money) is introduced and then withdrawn ("Why should I complete this puzzle if I'm not going to be paid?"). Unless you want your child to learn that every responsible thing he does must be tied to a tangible reward, do not increase allowable video game time based on grades.

Instead, remember that gaming is a privilege. As such, the daily limits that you decide upon can be *withdrawn* if his grades do not meet minimum standards. For example, you may have decided to allow one hour of gaming time per day after homework and chores have been completed and as long as his grades are above a B-average. If grades fall below this point, video game access is suspended until grades improve. The main point is that poor grades can be used to remove privileges, but good grades should not be rewarded with *more* gaming time. If you set one hour per night as a limit, do not increase this based on grades.

Encourage a Part-Time Job

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Note: This suggestion is intended for the parents of adolescents.

Adolescents are sometimes attracted to the world of online gaming partly because it provides a sense of challenge and excitement in a life that otherwise seems to lack a sense of purpose or direction.

Of course, too many after school activities and responsibilities can be overwhelming, stressful, and can diminish the enjoyment that would normally come from participation (i.e., the kids who are forced into structured sports, clubs, and activities almost every night of the week). On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who come home from school and have no other outside interests or responsibilities. Not all adolescents are interested in sports or clubs, but most can benefit from having a part-time job, especially if video games are the primary activity outside of school. In addition to reducing the idle time that can contribute to excessive gaming, part time jobs for teens can also:

- Foster greater responsibility and teach money management skills
- Increase confidence and self-esteem
- Encourage greater independence and maturity
- Teach skills not covered or emphasized in school
- Provide practical experience and initiate the career exploration process

Obviously, the conditions under which your child is permitted to work will depend on your values as a parent but also local labor laws. Most states and provinces have regulations regarding the age at which teens can be formally employed, acceptable working conditions, and maximum weekly working hours (my own recommendation is for no more than 10 hours per week during the school year). Although your teen may not *love* his part-time job, you do want to make sure that he is not being exploited.

Below, list any part time job ideas that you may have for your adolescent:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Consider a “Weekends-Only” Schedule

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Most parents who try to encourage healthy moderation for video games follow a daily limit for gameplay (e.g., one hour per weeknight after other responsibilities have been attended to). Another option is to create a “weekends-only” rule for video games.

As you can imagine, this approach has both pros and cons. In general, a simple weekends only schedule creates clearer limits and may be easier to enforce over time. This rule effectively removes all possibilities of video games during the school week – which can certainly make attending to homework easier and may improve school grades. It sends a strong message that playing video games is a privilege that depends on meeting other conditions, not a right. If this rule is consistently enforced, he will become accustomed to it and will eventually accept that gameplay is simply not permitted on weeknights. Consequently, there will be fewer opportunities for conflict to arise as compared to the nightly enforcement of time limits.

So, compared to a daily limit, a weekends only rule *can* be a better way to encourage moderation and should *eventually* be easier to enforce. However, keep in mind that while a weekend rule will result in fewer gaming sessions overall, the sessions themselves may be longer. Answering the following questions may help you decide whether to enforce a daily or a weekend limit, but keep in mind that you can always change your plan regardless of which method you try first.

Considering your child’s school responsibilities, which plan is likely to produce the greatest academic success?

Daily Weekend

Considering your child’s personality, which plan would be easier to enforce?

Daily Weekend

Considering your own schedule, which plan would be easier to enforce?

Daily Weekend

Considering your child’s activities outside of school, which plan would be easier to enforce?

Daily Weekend

In general, do you believe it is healthier to play for one hour six times per week (daily), or three hours twice per week (weekend)?

Daily Weekend

Notes:

- If you do not have a preference, feel free to present both options to your child, allow him to decide, and build it into your contract (see page 214) with him. Of course, this agreement is dependent on whether he abides by the rules and will need to change if he cannot keep to the set limits and conditions. For example, if trying to enforce daily limits results in frequent arguments you may need to move to a weekends-only rule. If this also is also unsuccessful a ban may be necessary.
- Eligible gaming times for a weekends-only rule can include:
 - Friday evening
 - Saturday morning, afternoon, or evening
 - Sunday morning or afternoon
- Under no circumstances should weekends-only be interpreted as allowing unlimited access. It is recommended that you use the daily guidelines on page 84 to allot total time for the week regardless of whether it is spread out over seven or three days.
- If you have permitted six hours of total weekly gaming and have decided to go with a weekends-only rule, do not allow all six hours on one day. For example, you may need to specify that two hours is permitted on Friday night, three hours on Saturday, and one hour on Sunday.

Join Your Child in Gaming

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Have you ever played video games with your child? Even if you do not have a great interest in gaming, could you find the time to join him for an hour or so per week? Even outside the issue of video game addiction, many experts recommend that parents occasionally play video games with their children. Obviously this does not mean that you must play every time he does, but there are a number of benefits that come from joining him once or twice per week.

- First, by showing an interest in his gaming, you demonstrate that you are not completely opposed to *all* gaming, just excessive gaming without proper balance in other areas of life. This will make it much more difficult for him to dismiss your rules and suggestions by concluding that you “just don’t understand” and are unfairly “biased” against video games.
- Joining his gaming sessions on occasion also provides an opportunity to bond with your child – something that may become increasingly difficult as he proceeds through adolescence. Games that have “co-op” modes in which you work together toward common goals are especially good choices to promote parent-child bonding during gameplay. In my experience, almost every child that I have worked with was open to a parent learning more about video games and welcomed him or her to occasionally play with him.
- By playing video games with your child you are also in a very good position to talk with him about other topics unrelated to video games. Depending on his personality and his relationship with you, he may be reluctant to open up about important issues in his life (e.g., peers, family, relationships, his future, substance use, sexuality, etc.). Parents often hope their children will come to them at any time for that deep “heart-to-heart” talk. For various reasons though, the child may not be comfortable doing so. However, if an external activity (in this case, playing video games together) outwardly “justifies” conversation, children (and teens especially) may be more likely to open up about topics unrelated to the actual activity. Although somewhat of a stereotype, this may be especially true for males (both young and old). For example, a 15-year-old boy may be unlikely to approach his father and say “Dad, can we sit down and talk about my feelings toward my new girlfriend?” However, he (and his father) may be more likely to talk about the relationship if they are throwing a football back and forth, hitting balls at the driving range, or in this case, playing video games. For many boys and men, an external activity provides a bit of an emotional safety net that allows them to discuss topics that would normally be avoided. Keep in mind that this can look very different from what parents may believe is the heart-to-heart “ideal”. That is, instead of an emotional back and forth exchange of thoughts and feelings, there can at times be *minutes* between comments! Do not dismiss these exchanges as less important or impactful – they can be wonderful bonding

experiences and can definitely present many opportunities for meaningful parenting moments.

- Finally, despite being at war against video game addiction, there is something to be said for knowing your enemy. By actually playing the game with your child you will have the perfect opportunity observe the elements that appeal to him, the qualities of the game that appear to draw him deeper into the fantasy world, and the emotional needs that are being met by playing. Learning about the game and what your child responds to is very valuable information to use when planning your intervention approach, setting rules, encouraging other activities, understanding additional personal difficulties, and helping your child in a firm but sensitive manner.

What if you are not interested in playing video games? Remember that your goal is not to find a new hobby, but to understand why these games have such appeal to *your* child, to be seen as open-minded, to bond with your child, and to potentially present yourself as a role model for responsible play. If you enjoy the game – great, but this is not a requirement. You are doing this to better understand and connect with your child, not for your own entertainment.

Note: Keep strict limits on your own play – don't become addicted yourself!

Make an Effort to Invite Friends Over

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

The following tip is mostly applicable to children under 15 years old.

As previously mentioned, when children first turn to video games it is often to reduce boredom. As play becomes more and more excessive, the child tends to lose interest in other activities, has fewer ways to entertain himself, and consequentially devotes even more time to gaming to compensate. One way to combat the boredom that encourages excessive play is to make it easier for your child to interact with friends. For younger children and teens without the means to travel to meet friends, you may try to make an extra effort to invite his friends to your home – especially if he is not involved in formal activities or groups outside of school. Not only does this encourage in-person social interaction (helpful for preventing the isolation and boredom that can lead to addiction), it also allows you to meet his friends and hopefully, the parents of his friends.

If he wishes to save his allotted video game time to play with his friends, this may be acceptable depending on the rules you have set. As a general rule, playing with others (in person, not online) is preferable to solo play (somewhat similar to how drinking alone is more suggestive of unhealthy alcohol use than social drinking). Of course, he should be made aware before his friend arrives that the same daily or weekly limits apply. That is, after X hours they will be required to stop playing and find something else to do.

Handheld Gaming: Yes, It Does Count Towards Daily Limits

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Before the introduction of handheld systems, gaming was tied to just a few physical locations – at home with a computer or console, or at an arcade. As gaming systems became more powerful and the same or better experiences could be produced at home, arcades became largely obsolete. In contrast, handheld gaming allows gaming to take place virtually anywhere, has only increased in popularity over the last decade, and shows no signs of slowing down. For example, Nintendo and Sony have literally sold hundreds of millions of DS and PSP systems. Apple sells millions of iPhones, iPods, iPads, and iPad Minis every month. All of these systems are very capable portable consoles and new generations of Nintendo, Sony, and Apple offerings are always just around the corner.

Handheld gaming is certainly here to stay and it is very likely that your child already owns at least one of these systems. If this is true, you should include handheld gaming time in the same weekly limits that are applied to computer or console games. That is, a one hour per day limit includes all gaming regardless of the system (e.g., 30 minutes of console gaming + 30 minutes of handheld gaming = maximum daily allotment).

Additional rules you may consider for portable systems include:

- The child is not permitted to take a portable system to school.
- The system should not be stored in a child's bedroom overnight. One parent I worked with discovered that her 14-year old son was playing his PSP up to three hours per night while everyone else was asleep.
- The system should not accompany the child on every outing (e.g., a trip to a friend's house, while in the car with you, etc.). With handheld systems, you may decide to make an exception to your rules on very rare occasions. For example, if a family has successfully enforced limits on PC gaming, they may decide to permit a child to bring along his handheld system to use for a few hours during the flight portion of a family holiday. Of course after arriving at their destination, normal limits (or even tighter restrictions) would apply for the rest of the vacation.
- The use of a portable gaming system should not be permitted during meals.
- While using a portable system, television is not permitted. If you allow this, your child may claim that he paused the game and was watching TV instead. Therefore, he may argue that he should be allowed to continue playing after his time has expired. Avoid this argument by not permitting other activities while he is "on the clock" so to speak.

Dealing with Gaming on Mobile Devices

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Not long ago, issues with gaming addiction were largely limited to computers and consoles. While still problematic, these methods of play were at least more visible to parents which made it easier to assess how serious the addiction was and to place limits (or bans) on allowable time.

However, today there is a very good possibility that a child or teen with unhealthy gaming habits will be using a mobile device (for example, a smart phone or a tablet) to access his or her favorite games. Unfortunately for parents, this has further complicated the task of addressing gaming addiction when it has taken control of their children.

Compared to preventing and treating video game addiction on a computer or console, obsessive gaming on mobile devices can present a different set of challenges for parents. Although most of the tips and techniques in this manual also apply to mobile devices, I would like to make a few points and suggestions about gaming on iOS (iPhone, iPod touch, iPad) and Android devices.

- First, gaming on mobile devices *absolutely* counts towards total allowable daily screen time. For example, if you have decided that total screen time per day is not to exceed 2 hours (again, after other responsibilities such as homework have been completed), one hour of PC gaming and one hour of gaming on an iPhone would be the limit.
- For parents attempting to reduce gaming on mobile devices, one of the main problems is that they are well, mobile. It is fairly easy to move a computer out of a teen's bedroom to prevent gaming while he is in his room. If a child is gaming on a console attached to a TV in a family room this is relatively simple to monitor (assuming that the parent is home of course). However, gaming on a mobile device can happen virtually anywhere - at home, on a bus, at school, at a friend's house, etc. Given that most teens (and many children) carry their mobile devices with them at all times, how can parents limit gaming-on-the-go if this is where the main problem lies?

1) Please remember that having a phone remains a privilege, not a right. I know that most teens would disagree, but having a phone or mobile device is not a necessity. Yes, I realize that this is how they communicate with friends, which is obviously very important. But if gaming on a mobile device is out of control, grades are falling, interest in other activities is almost non-existent, respect for parents is absent, and gaming rules are not being followed...the "right" to have a phone does not outweigh the responsibility of a parent to intervene. So, yes taking away a smartphone (assuming that efforts towards moderation as

described throughout this guide have not been successful) really is an option. But there are others...

2) When faced with the prospect of losing their favorite gaming device (often a smartphone) many teens will play the “I need a phone - it’s a safety issue” card. OK, fair enough. Although you do not see too many of them anymore, normal cellphones (i.e., non-smartphones lacking gaming capabilities) still exist. Yes, replacing your son or daughter’s full-featured smartphone with an “archaic” cellphone that can only make voice calls and texts will not be a popular decision. You are not doing this to be popular. When your child eventually earns your trust back by following the new rules around gaming that you have set, the return of the original phone or device (while still following gaming limits) may be an option.

3) If you have decided not to completely take away the device or replace it with a non-gaming phone, you will want to learn how to use the built-in parental control settings on any modern smartphone or install a 3rd party app to control access to games. Please keep in mind that with regard to videogame addiction, no app or setting is a substitute for good parenting. However, knowing how to use parental control tools can make fighting videogame addiction much (much) easier. See below for iOS and Android parental control settings and apps.

Android Parental Control Settings

[How to set up parental controls on Android](#)

[Six steps to setting parental controls for Android](#)

Android Parental Control Apps

[ScreenTime](#) (One of my favorite parental control apps for Android. Probably the most complete app for blocking and setting limits on games)

COST: \$3.99 per month or \$40.00 per year

FEATURES (quoted from the ScreenTime website):

✓ *Daily recurring time limit*

Kids spending too much time glued to their screen? Screen Time has a simple non-invasive timer that just works.

✓ *Bedtime control*

Block games at bedtime, but allow reading apps

✓ *Lights out control*

Block all apps at lights out time

✓ *School time control*

Block social apps and games, but allow educational apps during school hours

✓ *Block kids device remotely*

Time for lunch? Push a button on your phone, and your kids will be timed out from their devices. No more begging, bribing, or shouting!

✓ *Reward your kids with bonus time for completing tasks*

Kids used up today's Screen Time? If they tidy their room you can reward them with bonus time from the convenience of your own device. Add as many different tasks as you like - you'll be amazed how your kids start to manage their time responsibly!

✓ *Real-time monitor*

What is he doing on his device? What web sites is he visiting? What apps is he using? What apps is he spending most time on? Keep track of what they're up to from your own device, without having to own theirs.

✓ *Blocked apps*

Block certain apps completely. Get an alert whenever your kids install a new app.

✓ *Kids can't uninstall it*

Requires your own password to uninstall.

Mobile Minder (One of the most popular parental control apps for Android. Able to block apps but somewhat more focused on internet monitoring than on game control)

COST: \$19.99 per year

FEATURES (quoted from the Mobile Minder website):

Block Apps such as snapchat, whatsapp, angrybirds, googleplay, etc. MobileMinder allows you to browse the full list of your children's apps and block whichever ones you want.

Block access to porn and other inappropriate websites using the MobileMinder safe browser. You can block URLs, keyword searches or certain categories using your MobileMinder account.

See full internet history using the MobileMinder safe browser. Their browser history will also be viewable to you so that even if a new website appears that you haven't blocked, you will be made aware of it.

Stop Bullying, Sexting and inappropriate text messages. Get alerted to particular texts containing specific words which may be distressing your child.

Stop photo sexting and delete inappropriate photos

If you find a picture which you feel is inappropriate then you can remotely delete it from your child's phone gallery.

See who is calling your child. The call log includes the total amount of time spent on the phone with each contact as well as showing you how often your child calls them.

See who is texting your child. The text log includes the total amount of texts sent and received on the phone with each contact as well as showing you how often your child texts them.

Your child can reach you immediately in case of an emergency! Help Me is an alert button on your child's phone to let you know if they need help. If your child is lost or in danger they can press the Help Me button and a message will be sent to your child's security network which contains a link to the child's exact location. Your child's phone will also automatically place a call to each of the selected security contacts.

Dinner Time (App monitoring, shutdown control, and break control. Not as extensive in features as the above apps, but it is free and worth taking a look at)

COST: Free

FEATURES (quoted from the Dinner Time website):

1. Real-time monitoring: display real-time status of your children's device (offline, standby, online) and see which app is currently running
2. Bed Time control: set a start and end time to pause any activity while in Bed Time mode. This still allows kids to access their alarm clock
3. Instant timeout: set 'dinner time' break and pauses any activity for any set time, up to 2 hours. Set 'Take a Break' and pauses any activity for any set time, up to 24 hours
4. App and Device time limits: set time limits for how long your children can use both the app and the device, regardless of whether the device is online or offline
5. App blocking feature: choose which apps your child can access or block , i.e. only educational apps during exam time
6. Live usage history: see when the last 15 apps your child has been using and for how long
7. Parent notification: notify parents if unusual child's device activities are detected to give parents peace of mind
8. Customize permitted apps during restrictions: for example: allow reading apps during Bed Time restriction
9. Enhanced blocking feature: optional blocking feature for parents to provide the highest level of restriction control. When 'enhanced lock feature' is turned ON, the child's device will be completely locked with no access to any apps including incoming phone calls while restrictions are enforced
10. Add a second parent: share the DinnerTime Plus parental control with another parent by linking to their phone number

iOS Parental Control Settings

[iOS: Understanding Restrictions \(parental controls\)](#)

iOS Parental Control Apps

[My Mobile Watchdog](#) (Internet and App monitoring, time limit setting, app blocking)

COST: \$4.95 per month, \$44.95 per year

FEATURES (quoted from the My Mobile Watchdog website):

Control What Time The Phone Can Be Used

Approve New Contacts

Know When A Contact Is Deleted

Block Apps From Working

Block Specific Websites

Be Alerted on Specific Contacts

Backup Your Child's Contacts

Review Web Usage History

Review Visited Websites

Parent Kit

COST: Free for the 1st month. \$24.99 for 6 months, \$39.99 annually

FEATURES (quoted from the Parent Kit website):

Do you catch your child watching movies when she should be sleeping? Is your child playing games, when he is supposed to be studying? This app allows you to choose what your child can use their mobile device for, and when. Maybe you allow movies until your child's bedtime, but restrict access to Safari? Or allow Safari for studying, but turn off access to apps and movies. Or, restrict Safari access completely.

Using this app gives parents the option to set up a schedule, as well as parental controls, for any or all of their child's devices. The best part: it's all done from the parent's device, which acts as a remote.

Once a ParentKit profile is installed on a child's iPhone, iPod, or iPad, parents can set up a schedule of their child's access to Safari, purchased apps, and media, on every device ParentKit is enabled on. Each device can be scheduled and controlled separately, all from the parent's "remote" device.

Dinner Time (App monitoring, shutdown control, and break control)

COST: Free

FEATURES (quoted from the Dinner Time website):

1. Real-time monitoring: display real-time status of your children's device (offline, standby, online) and see which app is running
2. Bed Time control: set a start and end time to pause any activity in Bed Time mode. This allows kids to access their alarm clock
3. Instant timeout: set 'dinner time' break and pauses any activity for any set time, up to 2 hours. Set 'Take a Break' and pauses any activity for any set time, up to 24 hours
4. App and Device time limits: set time limits for how long your children can use both the app and the device, regardless of whether the device is online or offline
5. App blocking feature: choose which apps your child can access or block , i.e. only educational apps during exam time
6. Live usage history: see when the last 15 apps your child has been using and for how long
7. Parent notification: notify parents if unusual child's device activities are detected to give parents peace of mind
8. Customize permitted apps during restrictions: for example: allow reading apps during Bed Time restriction
9. Enhanced blocking feature: optional blocking feature for parents to provide the highest level of restriction control. When 'enhanced lock feature' is turned ON, the child's device will be completely locked with no access to any apps including incoming phone calls while restrictions are enforced
10. Add a second parent: share the DinnerTime Plus parental control with another parent by linking to their phone number
11. Animated report summary on child's device: avatar animates based on actual device usage; display today's total screen time, time left on the child device (if there is a screen time limit) and most used app to help kids with their time management

Reality Breaks

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In addition to setting specific daily or weekly limits for gaming, you may wish to schedule “reality breaks” during gaming sessions. Reality breaks are temporary stoppages in gameplay during which the child leaves the computer or console and does something else for approximately ten minutes. What he does during the break is not overly important and is generally left up to the child (although watching TV is typically not a recommended break activity).

Ideally, you want to encourage an activity that is, for lack of a better word, active. For example, appropriate breaks may include playing with siblings, talking with parents, reading, showering, grabbing a snack, etc. The goal is to break the trance-like state that often accompanies excessive gaming and that results in players losing track of the passage of time. For a moment, consider the experience of watching a program on television. Although commercials are often quite annoying, they do serve as a reminder of the passage of time with three or four commercial breaks for every thirty minutes of programming. In contrast, video games have no such reminders and it may be argued that gaming is an even more engaging experience as it requires active participation from the player. Consequentially, addicted gamers, like addicted gamblers, often report a distorted sense of time while playing (e.g., the passage of three hours is reported to feel like only one hour).

I recommend reality breaks for any gaming session with a limit of an hour or more. As a general guideline, schedule a ten minute reality break halfway through the agreed upon limit for a particular session. For example, if a child knows that he has one hour to play video games in the evening after completing homework and other chores, let him know that a ten minute reality break will happen after thirty minutes of gaming. If it is the weekend and he is permitted to have a two hour session, the reality break would come at the one hour mark. Not only does this break the video game trace, it is also a clear reminder that his gaming session is half over, which should result in less resistance when it is time to stop for the day (see page 79 for more on using reminders to increase compliance).

Note: Ideally, your child will keep track of his own reality breaks, but realistically you will likely be the one reminding him to take a break. Alternatively, you may ask him to set an alarm or timer when he begins so that he is not dependant on you for initiating the break.

Change the Cues

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

What time of day does your child usually play video games? Which days of the week is he most likely to play excessively? What is usually happening prior to his gaming? What events are often associated with excessive play? To answer these questions you may find it helpful to refer back to the One Week Record on page 51.

Times of day?			
Days of the week?			
Prior to gaming?			
Associated events?			

Unhealthy gaming, like most habits, can be triggered by predictable events and is more common during certain days of the week and certain times of day. You have already decided on acceptable daily or weekly gaming limits, but you may wish to add additional rules based on the information in the chart above.

Your goal is to disrupt the cycle of unhealthy gaming and prevent certain events from triggering excessive play. This can be accomplished by limiting gaming to certain times of the day, certain days of the week, and banning play following certain events. Specifically, you want to create rules that permit gaming during times *different* from those found in the chart above. For example, if your child often plays video games on Saturday afternoons from 12:00 to 5:00 (I am assuming that he currently has unhealthy play habits), you may create a rule that he is only permitted to play on Sunday mornings from 9:00 – 10:30. This enforces the maximum limit but additionally, only permits play during a (hopefully) less “risky” period.

Remember that you are not *promising* that gaming is always permitted at specific times. Again, playing video games is not a right. Rather, you are specifying that *if* other responsibilities are attended to and other conditions are met, gaming is permitted for a limited period at a specific time (e.g., from 9:00PM to 10:00PM on Thursdays).

Finally, note that one of the most impactful cue changes may be to move from daily permitted play to a weekends-only rule. This change may be offered after it is clear that daily limits are not working, but before completely banning the game.

Make Exceptions for Educational Software

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Although you have set daily or weekly time limits on video game, I think it is safe to assume that the problematic games are of the MMO, RTS, or FPS genres. While these games are played purely for entertainment purposes, there are *many* educational software titles and you may choose not to have them bound by the same restrictions. Although these titles are still entertaining, they also have academic / skill development components. As such, the time you offer on these “games” may not count towards your child’s daily or weekly limits. For example, if a child has already used his daily allotted time playing an RTS, his parents may still let him play an educational game focused on reading skills.

Educational games are readily available for the PC and all the major consoles. For example, “[Big Brain Academy](#)” for the Wii, “[Brain Challenge](#)” for the Xbox 360, “[Buzz Quiz World](#)” for the PS3, “[Brain Age](#)” for the Nintendo DS, and “[Hot Brain](#)” for the PSP. On the PC, there are many educational titles cleverly disguised as games. [JumpStart](#) is a popular line of “edutainment” software and offers products to develop skills in the areas of math, language, reading and writing, and science. The titles are appropriate for ages 3 – 14 can be purchased online or in traditional retail stores.

Although your child will probably not be as excited to play these games, he may be willing to give them a chance if you continue to enforce consistent limits on entertainment-only games. For educational titles, you do not need to worry too much about excessive play, and I doubt that many parents would oppose their child spending an hour developing reading skills – even if the delivery method resembles a game.

If you choose to make exceptions for educational titles, a rule may look something like this:

“A maximum of one hour of gaming per night from 9:00 – 10:00 if homework has been adequately completed, chores have been attended to, and other expectations have been met. This hour does not include time spent using educational software.”

Enforce Consequences for Breaking the Rules

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Early in this workbook I discussed how you should approach a child or adolescent who does not stop playing when his time limit has expired – even with a reminder from you. Consistently enforced negative consequences for a refusal to follow your instructions should, over time, result in far more cooperation from your child.

Additionally, it is very possible that you will discover your child breaking rules that you have set for allowable play. For example, he may:

- Have a game running in the background when he is supposed to be doing homework
- Play at a friend's house or some other location
- Play late at night or early in the morning while others are sleeping
- Play a portable system under the covers when you assume he is sleeping
- Reinstall games that have been banned
- Bypass parental controls, software controls, or hardware solutions
- Play while you are not at home even though this is not permitted (a keylogger or scheduled screen capture tool would be able to detect this)
- Reconnect internet access to his personal computer or console

As you can see, there are many ways to break your rules – people who are addicted to video games can be very creative, resourceful, and determined to regain access to their game of choice. If you discover that your rules have been violated, there must be consequences for the decision to disregard the conditions of play. Similar to your approach for refusing to quit after his time has expired (see page 81), consequences for breaking the rules should involve “negative punishment” (*removing* privileges for other activities) in addition to tighter restrictions on gaming. For example, a 14-year old who was caught playing when he should have been doing homework may have television privileges reduced or revoked for several days as well as a complete ban on video games for a few days. For a second offense, the bans may be even longer and may include the loss of other privileges. A third offense results in even more restrictions, and so on.

If your child continues to break your rules even though you are consistently enforcing greater punishments, consider switching to a banning approach (see page 187) in which you completely remove all access to the game in your house.

Help, But Do Not Enable Your Child

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Although the term “enabling” can have a positive connotation in some contexts, with regard to addiction enabling refers to the actions of others that are intended to help the addict but in fact allow the addiction to grow.

In the case of alcoholism, someone may try to help his or her spouse by frequently rescheduling appointments, calling in sick to work when he/she has been drinking, and making excuses for his or her behavior when drunk. Despite the good intentions, these behaviors only push the person further down the path to alcoholism as he/she is no longer accountable or responsible for his or her actions. Consequently, there is no incentive to make the necessary changes to drinking behaviors.

It is important to understand the difference between helping and enabling. In general:

Helping is defined as assisting someone with something that they *cannot* do independently (e.g., driving an alcoholic who has lost his license to an AA meeting).

Enabling is defined as doing something for someone that they could do for themselves, or something that allows the addiction to persist. Enabling makes it easier for the person to continue the problematic behavior (e.g., calling friends to apologize for the person’s poor behavior the previous night at a party).

Similarly, for video game addiction in a child or teen we can look at parental behaviors that help or that enable. This entire manual is focused on behaviors that are intended to *help* a child or teen addicted to video games, but what are some examples of *enabling* behaviors well-meaning parents sometimes fall into?

- Completing homework for the child
- Paying a monthly access fee for a game
- Buying new games
- Allowing him to quit other activities (e.g., clubs or teams)
- Providing upgrades for the gaming computer
- Allowing him to have his own computer
- Bringing food to him while he is playing
- Calling in sick to his school or work
- Cleaning his room (especially for older children and teens)
- Doing his laundry for him (especially for older teens)
- Continuing to provide an allowance despite a disregard for gaming rules
- Allowing him to skip school
- Allowing him to quit a job (for older teens)

For some individuals (regardless of whether they are addicted to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or video games), change does not happen until they realize that their life will *fall apart* if the behavior continues. If the enabling behaviors are in place, it is very easy for an addict to deny that he has a problem. He will not make the difficult decision to change until it is clear that his life is being destroyed by his actions and that no one is going to compensate for him. He must be forced to deal with the consequences of his own behaviors and decisions. It may only be when life becomes completely unmanageable that he will have the necessary motivation to change.

Could any of this be true in your situation? Can you think of behaviors that are enabling your child's video game addiction (by you or by someone else)? If so, list these behaviors below:

<p style="text-align: center;">My child's video game addiction is being enabled by:</p> <p>1) _____</p> <p>2) _____</p> <p>3) _____</p> <p>4) _____</p> <p>5) _____</p> <p>6) _____</p> <p>7) _____</p>
--

Now that you have identified possible enabling devices, you should seriously think about ending these behaviors when you begin your intervention plan. Although this manual generally focuses on things you *should do* to help your child, the list above represents things you *should not do*. Consider addressing these items in the treatment plan summary found on page 220.

Delay Post-Secondary Education if the Addiction is not Under Control

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In addition to my work with those addicted to computers, the internet, and video games, I also work in a student counselling centre at a mid-sized university. I would like to report that video game addiction is no longer an issue after one leaves home and begins post-secondary education, but unfortunately this is far from the truth.

If your 17 or 18 year old is currently addicted to video games and intends to go to college or university in September, you have an important decision to make. Unless he plans to pay for his tuition, his accommodations, his food, his books (i.e., complete expenses for his education), I do not recommend sending your child to university if he is clearly addicted to video games – especially if he will be living away from home.

If he has not learned to control his gaming addiction in your home, it is highly unlikely that healthy habits will suddenly emerge when he starts university. In fact, it is very possible that he will spend even *more* time gaming with his newfound freedom. If your child is close to university age, ask yourself how the following factors could influence his gaming habits:

- Living away from home with no parents to tell him when to stop playing
- Unlimited access to a high-speed internet connection in his room
- Classes that are essentially optional to attend (professors rightfully treat students as adults and do not force attendance)
- Large periods of unstructured free time (compared to high school, university students spend far less time in class but are expected to spend much more time working after class)
- Having no one to wake him up in the morning after staying up until 3:00 AM playing video games
- Classes that may have only two graded components - one midterm exam and one final exam (a format that requires great self-motivation and self-discipline if one hopes to stay on top of his or her studies)
- The ability to hide grades and general academic progress from parents

As you can see, the structure (or more specifically, the lack of structure) of university life is unlikely to encourage moderation in someone with excessive video game habits. Newfound freedom, the need for academic self-motivation, unlimited online access, and having no one to answer to is, quite honestly, a recipe for disaster for a video game addict. Compared to high school, academic responsibilities in university are unforgiving. Semesters are shorter (leaving less time to “make up” for a bad start), and exams and assignments are much more demanding. A poor academic year can result in lost scholarships, academic suspension, and will always be a part of the student’s official transcript (potentially preventing admission into other universities, professional schools, and graduate schools).

I have personally worked with many students who enrolled in university believing that they would easily be able to get their gaming habits under control when classes started. I will not go so far as stating that this is impossible, but in my experience the increased freedom and the decreased structure of college / university often promotes even more destructive gaming behaviors.

Keep in mind that preventing your child from attending university is not a form of punishment. Rather, you are simply recognizing that this is an important step in his life and that he must be in a position to benefit from the opportunity. If he is capable of As and Bs, a transcript of Cs, Ds, and Fs is certainly not beneficial and could very well hurt his chances of pursuing further education or achieving his career goals.

Many students choose to take time off after high school before going to university or college. Some choose to work for a while to help finance their education. Others need a mental break from academic life. Some decide to travel. There are also those who are not yet ready to take on the responsibility required for a successful post-secondary experience. For example, if someone is experiencing clinical depression that significantly interferes with their functioning in academic, social, or occupational settings, I would strongly recommend that they address this issue before beginning their studies. Similarly, I also recommend that someone who is clearly addicted to video games delay entering a new academic program until the addiction has been properly addressed and the behavior is under control.

Remember, the university is not going anywhere. It will still be there waiting for him when he is in a better position to succeed.

Making Difficult Decisions for Current College or University Students

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

If your child is currently in college or university, it is safe to assume that he is at least 18 years old. Officially, he is an adult who is responsible for himself and for making his own decisions. In reality, there is a very strong possibility that he is still dependent on his family for many necessities (food, shelter, clothing) and non-necessities (tuition, books, car-payments / bus passes, etc.).

If it is clear that your child is addicted to video games and consequentially, is performing well below his potential in university (failing classes, Cs and Ds when he is capable of As and Bs), you have a difficult decision to make. You can continue to support him financially despite the poor grades and hope that he somehow becomes motivated to stop gaming (see the previous point on page 174 on how likely or unlikely this may be). Or, you can stop financing his education can bring him home until he is able to control his gaming habits.

Yes, this is definitely “tough love”. As a parent, it is difficult to come to terms with the fact that you are not allowing him to continue his studies (at least for now). By no longer financing his education (tuition) or the necessities that make his education possible (for example, rent), you are taking a strong stance against the addiction. This is a very difficult decision to make but try to remember the importance of not enabling the addiction (see page 172) and of delaying post-secondary studies until he is ready to benefit from the opportunity.

If he is an adult, you cannot technically force him to withdraw from his classes. However in many cases, withholding financial support will have this effect. If he has not paid his tuition he cannot register in classes. Faced with the reality of his financial situation, he may decide to get a part time job or work more hours so that he can remain in university. This is his choice to make and again, if he is an adult you cannot stop him from making this decision. If possible though, you should try to explain to him that his education is important to you, and that you fully support his return to school as soon as he has regained control of his gaming habits.

When he returns home, you should consider removing all access to video games (see more on banning games starting on page 187), make sure that he secures a full-time job, and encourage him to seek counselling to help him refocus and establish meaningful goals during this temporary break from his studies.

Note: I do not recommend bringing him home after only one semester of poor grades. Give him the opportunity to address the problem over the course of the academic year (you may wish to recommend that he contacts counselling services on campus if this is an option). Yes, remaining in school this could result in more failed classes, but he does deserve the opportunity to acknowledge the problem and respond accordingly. If it is clear that excessive gaming has resulted in failed classes and minimal commitment to his studies, give him a warning that he must address this problem and show significant improvement during the next semester. If this does not happen (for example, if he continues to fail classes), it may be appropriate to keep him home when classes resume in September. Difficult predicaments often call for difficult decisions – and this may very well apply to failing university or college classes as a consequence of video game addiction.

Prevent Covert Late Night Gaming Sessions: “Remove and Lock”

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Children and teens that are addicted to video games, especially those in the MMO genre, can be very creative when it comes to obtaining gaming time unbeknownst to their parents. Common strategies include:

- Playing at a friend’s house
- Playing at school
- Playing at an internet café
- Playing on a laptop borrowed from a friend and hidden in the bedroom
- Playing at work (very easy if one has access to a computer and is not closely supervised)

As previously mentioned, parents are often surprised to discover that their child is secretly playing very late at night when others are sleeping. Preventing these sessions is fairly straightforward. To make sure that your house is game-free during the night, consider trying one or more of the following tactics before going to bed *each night*.

- Physically removing and locking up the...
 - Internet router or connection cables
 - Computer monitor
 - Keyboard (easier for you, but also easy to bypass with an extra keyboard)
 - Game console
 - Game controllers
 - Laptop computer
- Making sure that your neighbors do not have an unsecured wireless network that your child is accessing to play online games
- Using software or hardware solutions (see page 103).

Notes:

- Admittedly, nightly rituals of removing and locking up equipment will be a bit tedious. However, if you continue to enforce limits, reward healthy behaviors, and address violations using negative punishment (i.e., follow your intervention plan), the addiction will either:
 - A) Subside...and nightly locking is no longer needed.
- Or
- B) Persist...and a more permanent solution such as a weekends-only rule or even removing all access to the game from your home may be required.
-
- You are not expected to lock up computer equipment every night for years and years, but you may have to do so for several months while the strength of the addiction weakens.
 - Removing and locking equipment is a strategy that you can also use for other times of day. For example, if you have set a daily limit of one hour between 8:00 and 9:00, or are following a weekends-only rule, you could keep all necessary equipment locked up until your child is permitted to play. Is this too heavy-handed? If your child is unable to control his own gaming habits, this is a perfectly reasonable approach to take before deciding to completely ban all gaming in your home.

Switch from a Wireless to a Wired Connection

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

How is your home connected to the internet? As the technology improves and the price of hardware decreases many families are switching from wired to wireless internet connections. With speeds that are comparable to traditional cable connections and the convenience of having “access anywhere”, wireless networks are certainly appealing for the home.

However, if you have a child or teen who is addicted to online video games, you may want to reconsider your decision to go wireless. Making the switch back to a wired connection will certainly not solve your child’s video game addiction, but it will make it easier to enforce limits and prevent gaming during non-permitted times. If you have wireless access in your home and someone who is addicted to online games, there is a very good possibility that he will attempt to play without your knowledge. For example, one family that I worked with was surprised to discover that their 14-year-old son had purchased an inexpensive laptop (\$150) from a friend and had been secretly playing WoW at night for over 6 months (accessing the wireless connection from his room).

Yes, this will be inconvenient if your family has come to rely on having wireless access at home. But, is wireless internet at home really a necessity? If switching to a wired connection makes it easier for you to enforce limits and prevent access to the online game, is it not worth the inconvenience? If you absolutely must have wireless internet at home, make sure that you secure your connection and do not provide the password to your child. Keep in mind that if he believes that undercover gaming will be possible if he learns the password, he will work very hard to break the security code. In some cases he may be successful if he is resourceful and knows how to access the necessary information online.

Switch from a High Speed to a Dial-Up Connection

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the descriptions of the various types of video games early in this workbook, it should be clear that without the online connectivity many of the most addictive games are no longer appealing or even playable. Usually, high speed connections are necessary for the most popular games and for the games that are most addictive.

Since you are reading this workbook and thus have a child who is addicted to video games, I can also assume that you have a high speed internet connection in your home. Although many of us have come to depend on this type of “always-on” high speed connectivity, ask yourself if this is truly necessary given the struggles you are having with your child. That is, if switching to a dial-up connection would render many of the most addictive games unplayable, could you do it? You would save money (dial-up internet access generally costs no more than \$10 per month), but it would definitely be inconvenient. No longer would you (or anyone else in your family) be able to download music, download large applications, watch videos online, use a webcam, etc. Your online experience would essentially be limited to (slowly) accessing web pages and using email. But, it may also prevent your child from spending hours every day playing FPS or MMO games. Are you willing to make this sacrifice?

Note:

Although switching to a dial-up connection is an option, it is quite unappealing for many parents and families. It may seem unfair to “punish” everyone in the family (for example, other children who play video games and use the internet responsibly) for the difficulties experienced by one individual. If this applies to your situation, one of the software solutions starting at page 103 may allow you to keep the high speed connection while still limiting access for the child or adolescent with unhealthy gaming habits.

School Counsellors: Potential Resource

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the spirit of discussing as many tips, strategies, and techniques as possible, it is worth mentioning school counsellors as a potential resource.

If you are unable to offer the necessary help for an addicted child despite your best efforts, it may be necessary to seek assistance from outside sources. Although I generally recommend enlisting the help of a mental health professional such as a psychologist, there are a number of reasons to at least consider making contact with your child's school counsellor (if the school has one of course).

- Your child may be more willing to visit the school counsellor as there may be fewer stigmas attached to this as compared to seeing a “shrink”.
- The school counsellor will obviously have a considerable amount of experience dealing with young people and may be very skilled in making students feel comfortable talking about their difficulties.
- Seeing a school counsellor is likely a free service – something that may be an important consideration for those who do not have insurance coverage for psychological consultations or cannot afford to otherwise pay \$100 - \$200 per hour.
- The school counsellor may in fact be a registered psychologist (more likely for larger schools) or a very skilled professional with the necessary experience and training to help those with more complex problems like video game addiction, depression, and challenging child-parent relationships.
- Compared to mental health professionals who do not often work with children and teens, school counsellors may be far more familiar with the culture of video games and the problems associated with excessive use.

The most obvious disadvantage of seeking help from a school counsellor is that it will essentially be up to your child to attend sessions. That is, if you are seeing a private mental health professional you can make sure that your child makes it to the appointments. In contrast, at school your child has the freedom to choose whether or not he uses the service (and whether or not he tells you the truth about his attendance).

In summary, if your child's school has an in-house counsellor you should seriously consider this person as a potential resource. There are many very skilled counsellors working in our schools, and you may be able to consult with one for guidance even if your child is not present during the meeting.

Make a Contract for Play Conditions, Possible Rewards for Cooperation, and Consequences for Violations

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

A very useful tool for moderation and for bans, is to create a video game contract with your child.

You can use the contract after you have decided on new rules, conditions, limits, and expectations for video game play. This will come after you have completed the exercises in this workbook, consulted with your spouse or partner (if applicable), and discussed certain preliminary aspects of the contract with your child (for example, possible rewards for cooperation). You can then use the contract to clearly explain these new rules for your child, how they will be enforced, and the consequences for violations.

The advantages / benefits of using a contract include:

- It should help you organize, prioritize, and define very specific rules for your child's video game play (e.g., play is only permitted for 1 hour per evening, is not allowed outside the house, is conditional on maintaining a 70% average in school, etc.).
- It should help you *clearly* explain all the new rules to your child. By going over the rules one by one with a tangible contract, it will be impossible for him to say that he did not know about or did not understand the rules.
- Seeing a rule on a paper contract sends a much stronger message than a verbal request does. It signifies that you are serious about dealing with the addiction and that you have a clear plan of action.
- Creating a contract not only binds your child to the conditions, it also encourages *you* to enforce the rules that have been set. For example, if your child breaks the rules, your contract should specify exactly what you *must* do in response. It is equally important that you and your child follow the agreed upon conditions.
- Creating a contract requires you to plan ahead and also sends a "warning" to your child about possible next steps if he does not follow the rules. For example, if you begin with a moderation approach, you are giving him the opportunity to demonstrate self-control. But, if he cannot follow the rules, you can specify that tighter restrictions will follow, a ban on the game, or a ban on all games. In order to avoid these undesirable scenarios he must abide by the current contract. If not, you have no choice but to take the next step.

- A contract can serve as a source of motivation for the child. If you decide to provide reasonable rewards for cooperation (see page 138), be sure to also include this in the contract.
- For parents who do not wish to impose a ban right away because they hope / believe that their child can get the gaming under control, using a contract allows them to test this possibility.
- For parents who *know* that their child will violate rules for moderation, using a contract gives him the opportunity to do so...and consequentially, strongly suggests that a ban may be necessary.

Note: A worksheet for creating a contract with your child is provided on page 223. Also, there is a parent-child gaming pact from Microsoft available [here](#).

“Convincing” a Child that His Gaming is Harmful: Save your Energy

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

At some point during a first session with a parent he or she will say something to the effect of:

“I’ve tried everything to convince my child that he has a problem, but nothing I tell him seems to work. What can I say to convince him that he plays too much?”

My advice? Save your energy – you do not need to convince him that his play is problematic or that he is addicted to video games. Furthermore, there is very little that you (or anyone else) can say that will convince him to change his habits. Unfortunately, a strong state of denial about harmful consequences is almost a prerequisite for an addiction to develop and persist. Those who are addicted to video games (children, adolescents, and adults) will deny any negative personal consequences of excessive gaming and will downplay how their habits impact others who care about them. Even as numerous negative consequences become apparent to others (failing grades, deteriorating health, and poor interpersonal relationships) the addict will explain these happenings in a way that does not implicate video games. The goal is to rationalize and justify the behavior so that gaming can continue. In this state, words alone hold very little weight with the addict and can easily be dismissed. Only when his life clearly becomes unmanageable may he finally acknowledge the problem. If his addiction is no longer being enabled (see page 172), he moves one step closer to recognizing the extent of the problem. With an adult who is addicted to video games it is sometimes necessary to let him reach the point of an unmanageable life (because acknowledging the problem *is* necessary for an adult video game addict). With children and adolescents though, you may not need to let them reach “rock bottom” because you can initiate change on his behalf before he is ready or willing to acknowledge the problem.

As mentioned earlier, unlike an adult who is addicted to a substance or a behavior (e.g., alcohol, drugs, gambling, and video games), your child does not need to admit that he is addicted to games for change to happen. Because you are the parent, you have the power (or will very soon regain the power) to make decisions that are in your child’s best interests. Yes, you can explain the reasoning behind your decisions, but you do not need to convince him that your reasoning is correct prior to taking action.

When clear limits are set and enforced, when consequences for violations are expected, when rewards for cooperation are possible, when the ease of access is reduced, when alternative activities are encouraged, and when enabling is reduced, children and teens can recover from video game addiction...even if they never fully acknowledged it as a problem.

PART V:

**Strategies, Tips, & Thoughts
For Video Game *Bans***



A Word on Banning

Welcome to the next major section of this workbook – advice, strategies, and thoughts for parents who have decided to completely ban certain (or all) video games from their home.

Hopefully you have arrived at this section *after* reading the sections on education, assessment, preparation, and moderation. As noted elsewhere, much of the advice contained in these previous sections is applicable to those who choose to take an abstinence approach to helping their child overcome video game addiction. If you already decided to ban video games before purchasing this manual and jumped forward to this section, please go back and read the other sections before proceeding.

All finished with the previous sections? Great, we can now talk about completely banning video games from your home. *Remember to use appropriate tips, techniques, and approaches from the section on moderation as you develop a plan for a video game ban.*

Sooner or later this is a course of action considered by many parents with children who are addicted to video games. It was likely not your first option. Completely removing something that a child loves is not something that most parents wish to do. They look around and see other children and teens who appear to have no difficulties playing video games within healthy limits. They wonder if with proper supervision, their child could also play in moderation. They set limits, encourage moderation, and impose consequences for the violation of rules. Yet, nothing seems to work. Despite many attempts to establish healthier gaming habits, their child continues to play excessively. The parents realize that their child, much like an alcoholic, is unable to control this aspect of his life. His habits are excessive, destructive, and are consuming his life. Eventually, video games *are* his life. He is unable to play in moderation and is clearly addicted. The parents refuse to let their child's life be destroyed by an obsession with a virtual world. They come to the conclusion that completely removing the game (or games) from the child's life is necessary. They are not exactly sure how he will respond, but they are quite certain that this will not be an easy process. Yet, they must proceed despite the inevitable resistance that will follow. They know that they are the parents, the responsible adults, the protectors, and that *they* must take control and do what needs to be done. Moderation was not the answer, banning the game is necessary.

They tell themselves that the enemy is the addiction, not their child.

As you now are doing, they prepare to pull the plug once and for all...

How to Know it is Time to Give Up on Moderation and Enforce a Gaming Ban

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In general, there is little harm in giving your child a *chance* to demonstrate healthier gaming habits (i.e., moderation) before completely banning the game. Of course, this does not mean that you offer chance, after chance, after chance. Rather, you can give him a reasonable opportunity to play according to your guidelines (with ongoing modifications as appropriate), but if he is unable to follow these rules you must consider the option of permanently removing the game(s) from your home.

If your child had been able to demonstrate that he can abide by healthy guidelines and rules (for example, only playing one hour per night, limiting play to weekends, etc.) you would most likely be just fine with his hobby. Unfortunately, he has not been able to control his video game habits. It is not a hobby, it is an obsession. Because video game addiction may not be as damaging as other addictions (for example, in comparison to alcohol addiction), those affected by the problem are sometimes reluctant to follow the approach prescribed for overcoming more well-known addictions. Specifically:

- Overcoming alcohol addiction involves abstinence from alcohol.
- Overcoming drug addiction involves abstinence from drugs.
- Overcoming gambling addiction involves staying away from casinos.

Although overcoming video game addiction does not *always* require eliminating the game(s) from one's life, *often* this is necessary. For some individuals, the appeal of immersing oneself in a virtual world at the expense of time spent in the physical world is just too strong. For these individuals (whether they are children, teens, or adults), moderation is not possible. Objectively, a video game addict may be able to recognize that gaming is seriously damaging other aspects of his life, but as long as the game is accessible he is unable to say "no" to any opportunity to play. Many adults who are addicted to video games must completely uninstall games, throw away game discs, sell gaming systems, and lock down their computers so that new games cannot be installed. It reaches a point where they must walk away from the game forever if they hope to form meaningful relationships, advance their careers, succeed academically, and quite frankly, find happiness (it is rare for someone who is truly addicted to video games to be genuinely satisfied with his life).

How do you know when it is time to use an abstinence approach for video game addiction? On the next page, you will find a list of indicators suggesting that it is time to completely ban a game. Obviously, not all of these points will be relevant to your situation. You certainly do not need to have *all* of the indicators before switching to a banning approach. But, the more that *are* applicable the more likely it is that a ban is necessary.

Place a check next to the indicators that are true for your situation:

Action or Assessment	Check ✓
1. My child's game of choice is a FPS, RTS, Sandbox game, or MMO.	
2. After months of limit setting, my child continues to play when I tell him it is time to stop.	
3. My child does not seem to care that I place restrictions on other privileges when he violates rules for playing video games.	
4. Despite my encouragement, my child has refused to participate in other "real-world" activities.	
5. My child blatantly violates the rules for gaming that I have set (e.g., plays during times that are not permitted).	
6. Despite a warning that his academic work must improve (or video games will be banned), my child's grades in school continue to be very poor and show absolutely no sign of improving.	
7. When it was apparent that my child could not play within his limits during the week, I imposed a weekends-only rule. However, this was also not successful and he continued to play excessively.	
8. My child is not currently attending school and spends all his time playing video games.	
9. My spouse / partner and I have presented a united front with regard to video game rules, but my child has continued his excessive play.	
10. I have used software or hardware solutions to restrict access, but this was also not successful.	
11. I have made a point to always follow through on my promises for disobedience (e.g., I need you to turn off the game within the next two minutes. If not, you will also lose your iPod for the next week."). This had little impact on his playing.	
12. When my child continued to play after his time has expired, I consistently enforced the two-for-one rule (see page 89). Still, his excessive play continued.	
13. I tried to use the 5-week gradual reduction approach (see page 87) to bring my child's gaming use to acceptable levels, but this was unsuccessful.	
14. I have removed all computers and video game consoles from my child's bedroom, but he still found a way to play without my permission.	
15. I have taken steps to make sure that no one in my family is enabling my child's video game addiction (see page 172), but the excessive play remained.	
16. Although I was hoping that my child would be able to control his gaming, my instinct tells me that I need to completely remove this game from my home. I do not believe that it is possible for my child to play in moderation.	
17. I am confident that my child is <i>not</i> suffering from another psychological difficulty (e.g., depression, anxiety, serious interpersonal difficulties) that needs treatment before addressing his problems with video games.	
TOTAL	

Decide Whether this is a Ban on a Single Game, a Game Genre, or All Games

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Now that you have decided to take a different approach to helping your child overcome his addiction, you must decide if you will be banning a specific game, forbidding him to play an entire game genre, or eliminating all video games from your home.

You may believe that your child's problem is limited to a particular game (e.g., WoW) and that removing this game will effectively eliminate the addiction from his life (with time of course). This may be true for your child and I have certainly worked with individuals who, for a number of reasons, are only obsessed with a single game. When the game is finally gone, the person is able to start rebuilding his life. The potential problem with this approach is that if your child's addiction is not limited to one game, there are many similar games ready to take the place of the banned one. For example, if you ban WoW, he may start playing Runescape. If you ban Call of Duty, he may start playing Gears of War. Unfortunately, he has only replaced one obsession with another.

To avoid a situation in which a child is prevented from obsessively playing one game only to redirect his energy into another, you may consider banning *all* video games from your home. No computer games of any form. No video game consoles. No handheld gaming systems. This approach adopts the philosophy that from this point forward, your home is a "game-free" zone. The potential downside of this approach is that it may be difficult to implement if there are other gamers in the house, may be met with the most resistance, and may not be even be necessary. Completely banning all games is definitely a possibility, but there is one more option that is often preferred to either of the already discussed approaches.

Although it is impossible for me to know what is most appropriate in your particular situation, I can report on what seems to be most effective for the families I have worked with in the past. If you are committed to an abstinence model, in general I *recommend starting with a ban on specific game genres*. This is a middle-of-the-road approach that serves to eliminate the most problematic game, usually prevents other addictive games from entering your home, and yet still allows for occasional (healthier) play with games that are far less likely to result in addiction.

Specifically, if moderation is clearly not possible I recommend banning the following genres: MMO / MMORPG, FPS, and RTS. You can refer to pages 12 – 22 for descriptions of these genres and use the websites on page 95 to determine if a specific game falls into one of the banned categories. If it does, it is immediately removed from the computer or console and all future games are subjected to the same assessment and actions.

Given the above considerations, are you leaning toward a game ban, a genre ban, or a total ban?

Game ban

Genre ban

Total ban

Please provide your thoughts on why you have made this decision.

One final note: Treating video game addiction is always a work in progress. Your strategies and interventions will almost certainly change over time as the addiction fights back and adapts to your strategies. Give an intervention time to succeed, but if it is clear that different measures are needed, be prepared to impose tighter restrictions or change your approach.

For example, some parents choose to start by banning the game that has created the most problems for their child. If by removing this game the child (eventually) starts to reengage with the real world (for example, improved grades, healthier family relationships, new interests in other activities), this may be sufficient. However, if the child responds to this removal by becoming obsessed with a similar game, it may be necessary to move to a genre ban. If this prevents the child from becoming addicted to replacement games, no further bans are necessary. But, if the child is *still* obsessed with playing video games (even with genres less likely to result in addiction), a total ban on all games must be implemented. Of note, you can use this “escalating restrictions” strategy to encourage compliance with new rules (see page 193 on talking to your child about an upcoming ban).

Combine Bans with Enforced Limits and Other Strategies for Moderation

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Unless you have decided to implement a total ban on all video games, you will still have to enforce limitations on the gaming that *is* allowed.

For example, if you no longer permit MMO and FPS games but still allow games of the racing, action, platform, and puzzle genres, you should still follow many of the guidelines outlined in the section on moderation. Your treatment plan will look very much like a parent who has decided to attempt moderation. The only real difference is that your plan will also include a rule that no MMO and FPS games are permitted. Therefore, a possible list of rules and guidelines may resemble the following:

- MMO and FPS games are banned
- Current and new games must be age-appropriate as determined by ESRB ratings
- Parent will never make threats that he/she is not prepared to follow through on
- Five and one minute warnings will be provided
- There will be a gradual reduction in permitted gaming over five weeks
- After five weeks, gaming will be limited to one hour per evening
- Gaming will only be permitted after homework is complete
- Child must maintain a B-average or tighter restrictions will be in place
- Gaming will not be permitted on Saturday afternoons or Sunday evenings
- The “two-for-one” rule will be followed for gaming time that exceeds the allowed limit
- Child will be allowed to pursue interest in _____
- TimesUpKidsz will be used to allow / prevent computer access during certain periods
- Computer A will be a “work computer” and Computer B will be a “gaming computer”
- All computes and consoles will be removed from the child’s bedroom
- Cooperation with rules will be rewarded with _____ at one month
- Parent will no longer _____ (list of enabling behaviors)
- If rules are not followed, a total ban on gaming will be considered

As you can see, unless you are imposing a total ban on video games in your home, you must still set up a number of rules to prevent gaming from taking control of your child’s life once again.

Note: You may wish to refer to this page when you complete the intervention summary worksheet on page 220.

How to Inform your Child of a Ban and Start the Process

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

As previously mentioned, I usually suggest that parents attempt a moderation approach to their child's gaming before an banning intervention. This is definitely not because children have a "right" to play video games (it is a privilege that can be taken away if necessary). Rather, there are two primary reasons to attempt moderation first:

- 1) It gives your child the opportunity to show that he can follow your rules, demonstrate self-control, and begin to set appropriate priorities
- 2) If he cannot moderate his habits, this gives you even more justification for a ban

We have already discussed the importance of giving a child the opportunity to demonstrate self-control (which when possible, is preferable to control that is imposed from parents). Now we can look at how failing to moderate his gaming makes it easier for you to implement a gaming ban.

When designing your moderation intervention (see page 220 for the summary worksheet and page 223 for the child's contract), you should make it clear that his response to the new rules will dictate whether additional rules or limitations are necessary. If he cooperates (even if he does not agree) he will be able to continue gaming within these healthier limits and may even earn a reward or two for his effort. However, if he is consistently uncooperative and violates the rules for moderation, make it very clear that the next step will be a permanent ban on his favorite game, a class of games, or all games. I suggest that you literally write this condition on his contract (page 223). For example:

"If the above rules are not consistently met, the game will be banned."

When completing the contract for moderation, it is not necessary to specify whether violations will lead to a game, genre, or total ban, as this decision will likely be informed by how he responds during the moderation period.

So, assuming that your child has not been able to play within the limits set during the moderation opportunity, how should you inform him that a ban will be happening?

- First, even though you put it in his contract, try not to surprise him with the news of a ban. Assuming that you are following the gradual reduction guidelines on page 87, keep him informed of his progress. Let him know how he is doing and whether he is generally meeting your expectations and abiding by the rules of the contract. Pull out the contract and go over the rules weekly if necessary. For a moment, imagine that he is now into week four of the gradual reduction plan. If he is still resisting the rules (for example, complaining when it is time to quit, going over time occasionally), you should have a talk with him about what you are happy about (generally following the new guidelines) and what still needs work (complaining when time has expired). In this scenario he seems to be making progress and you would probably continue to work on moderation at the end of the five weeks. However, if at four weeks he is blatantly violating the rules (remember, resistance is acceptable as long as he is still *abiding* by the rules) and shows very few or no signs of progress, inform him that the game will soon be banned unless significant improvement occurs over the next week. You want to give him plenty of opportunities to make the right decision with regard to his gaming but if he does not, the ban will not be a surprise as he has not met the conditions of his contract or listened to your warnings during the reduction phase.
- If it is clear near the end of the fifth week that the game will be banned in several days, inform him of this. As previously discussed, one of seductive elements of online gaming (especially MMOs) is the responsibility that players feel towards other members of their team. By warning him that the game will be banned in three days (for example), you give him a chance to tie up his obligations to the team. Additionally, he now knows that he should not schedule any future matches, raids, or battles with his team. You are not doing this to prolong the addiction. Rather, by giving him a warning, you may avert arguments that come from enforcing a ban that conflicts with prior “promises” to teammates.
- If you have any reason to fear for your safety when you tell him that he is now banned, do not deliver this news alone – make sure that at least one other adult is present. Note that if your safety or his safety is a concern, I *strongly* recommend that you seek professional support before implementing *any* form of intervention (moderation or abstinence). You can still use many of the tips and strategies in this manual, but will be doing so with the additional guidance and expertise of an experienced psychologist or counsellor. Also, if at any point the possibility of violence is imminent, do not hesitate to call the police. You must always protect your child, yourself, and your family members from physical harm. If you suspect that your child may have a violent reaction, I also advise you to make contact with the police *before* the ban is implemented. Ask questions about possible resources you can contact if your child threatens to harm himself or someone else. Ask for advice on the specific steps to take and make sure that you get a list of emergency phone numbers (including the emergency department at the local hospital). Hopefully you will not need to use any of these emergency resources, but there is absolutely no harm in being prepared in the event that you do.

- Assuming that safety is not a concern, at the end of his five-week opportunity for moderation you will need to inform him that he has not meet the conditions of the contract and that the game (or genre or all video games) will be banned. I recommend doing this in the morning or early afternoon. Although it is not absolutely necessary, some parents have allowed their child a few days to logon to the game (or the game's message board) in order to say goodbye to teammates or online gaming friends. Although this does prolong the inevitable removal of the game, remember that part of what makes certain online games so addictive is the feeling of commitment towards one's online team. If you do not anticipate any significant negative consequences of allowing the game in your child's life for a few more days, giving him the chance to say goodbye to his teammates is a caring gesture and could give him a sense of closure on this part of his life.
- If applicable, *both* parents or caregivers should inform the child of the ban. It is very important that a united front be presented to your child and that he does not view this decision as originating from and being carried out by only one parent (unless of course you are the head of a single parent family).
- Have your child's contract (page 223) with you when you sit down with him. Although the purpose of the talk is to inform him of the ban and not present "evidence" for your decision, you may find it helpful to have the terms that he agreed to nearby in case you wish to explain how he has not meet the conditions that were set.
- Stay calm. You are not looking to convince him that this is the right decision. You are not asking him whether he thinks he can "do better" with another opportunity. Once you have made the decision to enforce a ban, proceed onward. You have given him multiple opportunities to adapt to rules for moderation, but unfortunately he was not able to get his gaming habits under control. This talk is not an opportunity for another chance – the purpose is to calmly inform him that a ban will happen. He will not be happy with this. He may yell about how you "don't understand", protest that "it isn't fair", and will generally be quite vocal about his disagreement with these more drastic measures. Expect this and prepare for this. You must remain calm. Deliver the news (see example dialogue below), wait for his reaction, and then calmly restate the new rules. If it is clear that the conversation is going nowhere, you can then leave the room. At this stage you gain absolutely nothing by entering into a huge argument with him. The addiction will try to draw you in, but you will not let this happen.

- Example of a parent communicating news of a ban:

“Your father and I love and care about you very much. But, over the last few months we have had a lot of arguments over video games. I know you disagree, but we believe that you play way too much. Five weeks ago we talked about how important it was to cut back on how much you play. We know that you enjoy the game so we wanted to give you a chance to show that you can play by the limits we set. You agreed to follow these new rules. Unfortunately this did not work. Over the past few weeks we reminded you that unless you showed improvement we would have to ban the game (or the genre or all video games). We were initially going to ban all video games from the home. But instead we have decided that this game and other games like it are no longer permitted. Games that we approve of will be allowed but you will still have to follow rules for when and how much you can play. This rule can go into effect immediately, or you can have a few days to tell your friends that you will no longer be able to play the game.”

Notes:

- In all likelihood, this will not be the time to go over the details of these new rules. The child will likely be very upset upon hearing this news and will not be receptive to hearing about the new restrictions. Wait until he has calmed down and becomes curious about the new rules before discussing the specific details.
- Depending on your situation you may choose to ban only a specific game or all video games. The parents stated that they were originally going to ban all games but have reconsidered and will only ban certain games / genres. This is a reminder to their child that as bad as this news may seem, it could be even worse. It also introduces the possibility that depending on his behavior, a total ban may still be introduced. The parents in this scenario would be advised to inform their child (and write it in his contract) that if he cannot abide by these new rules, the next step will be to ban *all* video games.
- The parents state that they love and care about their child. Even though the child will not display much love toward his parents in this moment, they do not let this stop them from letting him know that he is very important to them.
- The parents acknowledge that their opinion differs from their son’s with regard to video games. However, they also clearly state that he plays too much and that they cannot allow this to continue.
- The parents remind their child that he was given multiple opportunities to demonstrate acceptable play habits. They state that since he was not able to get his play under control, they have no choice but to ban the game from the home. Even if you do not expect your child to be able to play within reasonable limits, you should still consider a five week *opportunity* for moderation. If he cannot reduce his gaming to appropriate levels during this period, it is perfectly reasonable to go forward with a ban based on his lack of progress when given a chance to show healthier habits.

- An opportunity to say goodbye to online gaming friends is provided. During this time, the parents will be preparing to uninstall the game, remove physical copies from the home, and use software or hardware to secure the computer or console.

Removing the Game and Securing the System

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

The time has come to remove the game / games from your child's computer or console. Unfortunately it is not possible in this manual to describe exactly how to permanently delete every possible game from every possible operating system or console. Different games and systems will require different steps to make sure that all traces of the game have been removed. Although it is not possible to provide specific steps for every game and system, some general advice is possible:

- Do not ask your child to uninstall the game. Unless you are very comfortable with computers and / or gaming consoles, I suggest that you ask for assistance with this step from a knowledgeable friend or professional. The reasons for this should be obvious. Someone who is addicted to video games will give the appearance of removing the game but will find a way to keep a copy on the computer or console. How? There are many ways to accomplish this such as:

- Secretly making a backup copy of the disc to be installed later
- Partitioning the hard drive and installing another copy of the game
- Throwing away a game disc that is not necessary to play the game
- Deleting a fake account that is not used to play the game
- Creating a fake folder with "dummy" files
- Temporarily deactivating an account only to reactivate it later

- Uninstall the game(s) and secure the system when your child is not around. For example, if you can accomplish this in a few hours you may choose to do it while he is sleeping. Otherwise, complete the removal process when he is away from the home.

- You must secure the system (PC or console) immediately after you have uninstalled the games (which is why you may need a few hours to complete the entire process). If your child gains access to the system before you have set yourself as a system administrator, installed parental control software, installed blocking hardware, or set system access controls, he may attempt to (secretly) reinstall the games. Again, ask for help from a knowledgeable friend or professional if you are not comfortable doing this yourself.

- If this is a *total ban on all games*, uninstall every game on the computer and secure the system so that your child can no longer install new programs. Realistically, you will not be removing all the computers from your home, but if this ban also includes console games, you will need to remove the console from the playing area and lock it in a room or storage area that your child cannot access. However, note that as long as it is in the house he may search for a way to retrieve it. Yes, you can lock it in your bedroom, but a determined and resourceful child will easily find a way to gain access. As an example, he may not have a key to your bedroom, but if he has a screwdriver he can remove the entire doorknob, gain access, and replace everything when he is finished playing. Therefore, I suggest physically removing the console and games from your home. If you are reluctant to sell them, give them to a friend or family member to store.
- If you are truly committed to permanently banning certain games, there is little need to hold on to these titles. If you have decided to sell the games (or console, if you are also banning the entire system), inform your child about this decision. If the child or teen has purchased the games or system with his own money, I do recommend giving the money made from the sales back to him – with the stipulation that it cannot be used to purchase more games. If *you* made the game / console purchases, consider talking to him about how the money could be spent. For example, you may agree to use it for a healthy activity he is interested in trying (see page 90) or you may put it toward a reward for cooperation at one month post-ban (see page 138).
- A number of families that I have worked with have chosen not to sell banned games, but to destroy them. They chose to do so because they did not wish to make a game that has resulted in so much destruction available to another person (especially if it is a child or adolescent). This is analogous to an alcoholic who chooses to empty his bottles down the sink rather than give them to a friend who also abuses alcohol. If you feel the same way, destroying the game may be a preferable option to selling it.

- If you choose to uninstall games using the add/remove programs function of Windows XP, Vista, or 7, be aware that there may be traces of the game that are not removed. Often, saved games are not removed when the program is uninstalled (in case the user wishes to retrieve old games when the program is reinstalled). After you uninstall the game, search for relevant files or folders that may have been left behind (often containing the name of the game or the company) and delete these files manually. You may also wish use a more comprehensive uninstaller such as [My Uninstaller](#) (free), [Revo Uninstaller](#) (free), or [Your Uninstaller](#) (free trial). Using a stand-alone uninstaller may also allow you to see a more complete list of the programs that are on the computer (games included) so that you can take appropriate action if removal is necessary. Additionally, using one of these programs may be better for ongoing maintenance of a game-free computer. Let's assume that you child has managed to secretly reinstall his favorite game. Even if you are checking for newly installed games using the add/remove feature on in Windows (I recommend doing this weekly), the game may not show up. Why? Because there are many free applications that will prevent new programs from making it on to this list. You simply install the game, run the program, and with a single click you prevent the game from being visible in the add/remove application. Furthermore, it is very easy to make files and folders invisible within Windows (usually available under the "tools" menu of any open window). I recommend using one of the more comprehensive uninstallers above to minimize the chance of a covert game installation, but if this is all starting to sound a bit overwhelming, you may wish to occasionally have your computer scanned and scrubbed by a knowledgeable friend or professional.

Cancel the Online Account / Profile

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Removing a game from a computer or console is not as easy as it once was. Before online play became such an important component of video games, removing a game was as simple as uninstalling the software or removing the game disc. Today, many of the most addictive MMO and FPS games require the user to register (and usually pay for) an online account or profile. Therefore, not only must you uninstall and physically remove game discs, you must also cancel the online account. Hopefully you have access to your child's account information, but if not you may have to contact the game's customer support centre. Normally, one person is not permitted to cancel another user's account, but as the parent of a minor you should be able to do so after verifying your identity and relationship to your child. Remember that if your child refuses to give you his account information (possible) and if the company refuses to let you cancel the account (unlikely), you do have the option of using a keylogger (see page 114) to get the critical information - but I do not recommend this unless it is absolutely necessary.

So, now that the game is uninstalled, the discs are gone, and the account is cancelled, the game is gone, correct? No, possibly not. For some games (most notably MMOs), even if the game is completely removed from the computer or console and the account is cancelled, his character is saved online and is available when he has the opportunity to play again (patiently waiting in suspended animation for his user to awaken him). Unfortunately, the exact details of what happens to a player's account and characters after the account is canceled can be quite ambiguous. Several addicted players have informed me that although an account can be cancelled, it can easily be reactivated with old characters still intact. In this sense, accounts can be *cancelled*, but depending on the game, it may be impossible to *delete* them. From the perspective of the game company, the reason for permanently storing an account / character is obvious – it conveniently allows players to “change their minds” about the decision to quit. Permitting them to resume from where they left off creates an easy reentry point without the daunting investment of rebuilding their characters (which could discourage a return to the game). From a business standpoint this is a very clever move, but from the perspective of a parent trying to break a video game addiction it can be quite frustrating.

So, if accounts and characters cannot truly be deleted once created, are there any other options for parents?

Read on...

Take Control of the Online Account / Profile

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Given the reality that some online accounts and characters are never actually deleted, not only must you cancel the account, you must also take control of it to prevent future access. Assuming that you have been able to access the account, you also need to create a new password that your child does not know. This should not be very difficult (just look for a section on “user settings” or “account information”).

Several years back, one of my clients was able to access his son’s account, change the password, and assumed that access was no longer possible. A few weeks after uninstalling the game and changing the password he discovered that his son was secretly playing when he came home from school. Unfortunately, the father unknowingly made some key mistakes that allowed his son to continue gaming. First, he did not remove the game discs from the home (he locked them in a room but this strategy was easily circumvented during an opportune moment when the door was unlocked). Second, he did not establish parental control settings to prevent his son from installing new games. But, he *did* change cancel the account and change the password. How then was his son able to reactivate the account? What he did not know was that every time he changed the password, this new information was immediately mailed to the email address connected to this account – which of course, was his son’s email address. Consequently, his son had full access to the account with the new password.

So, when you cancel the account and change the account password you need to do one of two things. You can either change the email address associated with the account (which should be possible), or you can intercept the email from the company notifying your child about the password change. Obviously, this second option requires that you are able to access your son’s email. If you have ethical or moral objections to intruding on your child’s privacy in this way, focus on changing the email address associated with the account.

Sell the Account / Characters

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

If your child is addicted to a game that involves the development / leveling of characters (most likely a MMO), actually *selling* the account is a more permanent option than simply deactivating it.

As discussed above, for most MMOs an account is never truly deleted. A simple request can quickly reactivate one's account and characters. Yes, you can take control of the account as described above, but you may wish to consider selling it to really ensure that it is gone forever. By selling the characters (which is very easy to do on eBay), another person takes over the account and the original user no longer has permission to use the characters. If we view taking control of an account as similar to taking the car keys of a friend who has been drinking, getting rid of the account on eBay is analogous to taking away the keys and selling the car.

The added bonus of selling the account is that money from the sale can be put towards other activities that will hopefully start filling the void left by the absence of the game. Alternatively it could be given directly to your child (with the rule that it cannot be spent on anything gaming-related) or used to fund a reward (see page 138) for cooperation.

My general advice is to sell the account rather than simply deactivate it. As long as you do not have strong moral objections to putting these characters into the hands of another player, I like the fact that selling is a more permanent solution and sends a clear message that strong action will be taken to deal with the addiction.

Obviously, selling an account does not prevent a player from starting from scratch (or buying *someone else's* character), but this is why you will also be securing the computer or console using parental controls, software, or hardware solutions.

Block Access at the ISP Level

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the previous section on moderation, I discussed using software solutions and parental controls to limit or block access during certain periods of time. Most of these software packages can also be used to completely block specific programs and games. With any software solution though, there is always the possibility that the security will be broken by someone who is sufficiently motivated. If you have decided to ban certain games you may wish to consider preventing access with the help of your internet service provider (ISP).

Most, if not all ISPs have parental control options available as an add-on to your internet package (usually for a monthly fee of \$5 or less). By activating these features you may be able to completely block access to the most popular gaming websites and servers, set age-appropriate web content restrictions, and prevent your child from gaming online. Of note, these restrictions happen at the ISP level and should be far more difficult to circumvent compared to software installed locally on your computer. Of course, for even greater security you may wish to install blocking software *and* activate ISP content filters.

Removing Internet Access

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

In the interest of presenting parents with as many tips, strategies, and options as possible, it is worth mentioning an option that will almost certainly prevent your child from spending his days immersed in an online world – canceling your internet access. With no connection, there is no online gameplay – very simple really. Combine the cancellation of your internet access with the removal of gaming systems, installation of parental security software on computers, and there is no question that your child will no longer be playing online video games in your home.

Realistically though, most families do not consider cancelling their internet access an option. Although internet access at home is not a need (much like television is not a need), it is a convenience that many people would find extremely difficult to live without. Without the internet at home, you would have no email, no video chats with family members in other parts of the country or world, no online banking, no Facebook, no way of downloading your favorite music, no way of downloading programs for your computer, no way of updating your system software, and possibly the biggest loss of all, no access to the largest source of information available in human history.

Yes, it is a lot to give up. Probably too much for 99% of the people reading this. If you happen to be in the 1% who could get along without the internet, go ahead and cancel your access – this will certainly eliminate many of your struggles with your child's excessive gaming. But for those who are not ready to take such drastic measures, remember that you do have the option of switching to a dial-up connection (see page 181). Although your online experience will be limited and definitely slower, you will still have access and the most addictive games (MMO, RTS, FPS) will not be playable online. Yes it is a sacrifice on your part, but if other strategies have not worked it may be worth experimenting with a dial-up connection.

If dial-up is not an option, at the very least make sure that there is no internet access in your child's room. This can be seen as a companion strategy to removing any computers and gaming consoles from his bedroom (see page 97). Ideally, the primary internet connection and the router should be located in your bedroom. A secondary connection in a family room that feeds off the primary connection is acceptable. When you wish to prevent internet access (for example when you are not home, during banned periods, when you are sleeping, etc.), you can simply disconnect the router in your bedroom and lock the door. Another option is to take the router with you whenever you leave the home. By following either of these strategies, you should be able to keep your home connected, but still prevent your child from going online when he is not permitted.

Stay Firm: Do not Back Down After A Ban has Been Set

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

After you introduce a ban on a specific game, a genre of games, or all video games, you should be prepared for the addiction to fight back as your child goes through what some consider to be a withdrawal phase (see page 208). Needless to say, this will not be a pleasant time for you, your child, or other members of your family. Your determination, patience, and resolve will be tested and pushed to the limit – especially during the first few weeks after the ban. During this period it is critical that you find the strength to stay firm on the ban. Whether this strength comes from your commitment to your child, support from friends and family, religious beliefs, or somewhere else, remind yourself that this is a battle you cannot afford to lose.

When the addiction fights back...when it tries to convince you that it will behave...when it promises to make your life miserable unless you feed it, you must not give in. Not enforcing consequences when rules are violated or breaking your own rules (“maybe you can play again if you *promise* to quit when I ask you to...”) will only strengthen the addiction. It will see you as weak and will become increasingly resistant to your influence. It will believe that it is in control of your child, not you. Perhaps it is already at this point. If so, it will take some time before it learns that the power has shifted. If you do not back down and continue to enforce the ban even as it fights back in the form of withdrawal symptoms, it will eventually see that it has lost control and will release your child. How long will this take? Although there is no way of putting an exact timeline on recovery (every child and situation is different of course), a few broad generalizations can be made:

1) Do not expect immediate improvement. It took time for the addiction to develop and it will take time for it to let go of your child. The old adage “Things will get worse before they get better” will probably be true. Your child may cry, yell, and beg to play again. You cannot give in or this will only reinforce this behavior the *next* time you try to enforce a ban. Do not wait until next time – *this* is the time to make the ban permanent.

2) If possible, you may wish to time the start of a ban with the beginning of another transitional event (e.g., the start of school, the end of school, the start of the month, etc.). Even better is if the ban coincides with a period during which gaming will not be possible for other reasons. For example, a number of parents have had success timing the start of a ban with the start of summer camp (during which the child would have no access to video games anyway).

3) The second and third weeks of a ban may actually be worse than the first week. In the first week, the addiction still believes that it is in control. With calculated resistance, it expects that you will weaken and will allow it to return. In the second week it realizes that things seem different this time. It starts to recognize that this is a real battle. It begins fighting for its life through the symptoms of withdrawal (page 208). Unless you have reason to fear for your own safety or the safety of your child (in which case get him to a professional as soon as possible), view the “withdrawal kickback” as a very good indication that you are on the right track. *Experiencing a negative reaction to the prevention of an addictive behavior is normal.* It is a clear sign that the person had lost control of his/her life and is now on road to recovery (despite strong protests from the addiction).

4) After several weeks on the offense, the addiction may tire. Instead of protests and aggression, your child may become lethargic or show symptoms of depression (see “withdrawal” on page 208). This is when many parents give in and allow video games again. Do not lift the ban. Support him in any other way that you can. Be there for him and listen to him when he wants to talk. Direct him to other (healthier) activities if he seems open to this. Get him out of the house whenever possible (even if he shows no interest in going out). Remind yourself why you *had* to remove video games from his life and that these reasons have not changed. Again, if you are worried about his safety or if he continues to deteriorate, look into the possibility of professional 1:1 counselling.

5) By the end of the first month, the grip of video game addiction may start to weaken. However, he may very well show continued symptoms of withdrawal – especially of a depressive nature. Stay strong – if he has not played the game(s) in over a month you are definitely making progress! Make sure that he takes care of himself and makes it to school. If he is not playing the game(s) anymore, a little extra care from family (favorite meals, family outings, extra patience) is just fine – this is *not* the same as enabling! Continue to offer other healthier activities that he may find interesting (see page 90). Most importantly, give him plenty of positive feedback (see page 138) on how proud you are of him – do not forget just how difficult this is for him.

6) *Eventually* he will realize that you are committed to this intervention, and will at some point accept that the game is longer a part of his daily existence. He will see that he must fill his life with other activities, interests, and goals. This may take six months or more, but the positive effects to come will last a lifetime.

7) After a game has been banned, I recommend that it is banned *forever*. For example, let’s assume that you ban a game your child is addicted to. He struggles with the ban at first but eventually accepts it and makes it to six months without playing. He then asks for another chance to play the game in moderation. I recommend that you tell him how proud you are of him (possibly with a small reward for his accomplishment), but that you keep the ban in place. After recovering, those with other addictions (drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking) are not encouraged to reintroduce the source of their problems, and the same is true for video game addiction.

Be Prepared for the Symptoms of Withdrawal

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Despite the fact that excessive, out-of-control video game habits have not been recognized as an official clinical disorder, I have used the term “video game addiction” throughout this manual. Given that the mental health community has not been able to reach a consensus on whether this is or is not a problem worthy of an official diagnosis, it will come as no surprise that the notion of *withdrawal* from video games is equally (if not more) controversial. After all, how can there be withdrawal symptoms from a disorder that does not exist?

To respect the very real video game related difficulties that you as a parent are experiencing (and also my own work with those who obsessively play video games), I have referred to this problem as an addiction from the very first page of this book. The intended audiences for this manual are parents with children who are addicted to video games, not those who are debating the validity of the problem. If we assume that this *is* a problem worth addressing (it is) and that it can be extremely difficult for addicted players to stop playing, then we must talk about what happens when someone is forced to let go of video games. That is, we must talk about the symptoms of withdrawal.

For the record, I will state right here that there are no *officially* recognized symptoms of withdrawal. The following symptoms and behaviors are based on emerging research in the field of video game addiction, personal accounts from parents, and my own work with those who are addicted to video games. With that said, what are the symptoms of video game addiction withdrawal and what may happen when you ban a video game (or games) from your home? Note that the number of symptoms and their severity will vary from child to child. Not all of the following points will apply to your child. If you are fortunate:

- He may only experience a few symptoms of withdrawal
- Symptoms will be relatively mild in severity
- The symptoms will be relatively short-lived

Of course there is the possibility that he will have an intense reaction to the removal of his favorite game that lasts for months. Stay strong and find additional support for your child, yourself, and your family if necessary (see page 212). Do not view these behaviors as a sign that you are doing something wrong. These symptoms may last longer than you hoped for, but they are still temporary. They *will* diminish when he starts to reconnect with the real world. Remember, you have made a healthy decision and are taking the necessary (but difficult) steps to help your child – do not let the points below cause you to question your decision to impose a ban!

- The most common sign of withdrawal is an oscillation between anger / agitation and depression / lethargy. Do not be surprised if your child seems angry at the world and very irritable in the initial weeks after enforcing a ban. This is very normal. In his view, a very important part of his life has been taken away for no reason at all. Although you as his parent will be the primary target of the anger, he may also be more hostile towards siblings, friends, classmates, and teachers as the reality of his situation sinks in. When the game is taken away nothing else will seem as exciting or as rewarding, and I advise against pushing too hard for other healthier activities in the initial week following a ban. You can suggest that he pursue other possible interests during a period when the anger has subsided, but in my experience there is little point in recommending other activities when he is angry at you for what you have (rightfully) removed from his life. When the anger does begin to subside (anger is an emotion that consumes a lot of energy and may eventually exhaust itself), a recovering video game addict commonly experiences feelings of emptiness, lethargy, and depressed mood. Although crying is sometimes present, sadness over his loss will more often be expressed by a withdrawal from other people and activities. He will tend to sleep for much longer periods and may have difficulty rising in the morning. The oscillation between irritation / anger and depression / lethargy can be very unpredictable. It can swing from one state to the other over the course of several days, or within a span of just a few minutes. Again, as long as he is not becoming physically violent or is in danger of self-harm, periods of anger and depression are a normal response to removing games from an addict's life.

- It is possible that your child will experience periods of anhedonia, which is a common feature of depression. Anhedonia refers to the inability to experience pleasure from normally enjoyable activities. People with anhedonia are often described as having extremely "flat" moods. Although the absence of pleasure is the core feature of anhedonia, it is not the only way that this condition is expressed. For example, the person may no longer experience pride, excitement, joy, and even stress. If this is true for your child, he may have great difficulty seeing and appreciating all of the positive things in his life. He may expect his future to be quite bleak and believe that he has nothing to look forward to. Someone experiencing anhedonia has pulled back from life and does not want to do anything at all. Remember that video games were his world – he lived to play and was focused on this experience only. When this is no longer a part of his life, it is not surprising that life will (temporarily) seem rather uninspiring and unexciting. Try to get him out of the house whenever possible (especially in the first few weeks after the ban) and encourage any interests he may show in other activities. Support him, monitor him closely, and with time (and a rediscovery of real-world activities) his mood will lift. Of course, if the anhedonia persists for several months with no signs of improvement, consider booking a consultation with a psychologist or other mental health professional.

- Online Gamers Anonymous has compiled a list of possible withdrawal symptoms [here](#).

Be Prepared for Negative Feedback from Others

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Because video games have become such a large part of childhood and adolescent culture, a child or teen that is no longer permitted to play has to deal with being “out of the loop” with this aspect of popular culture. His friends and classmates may discuss their latest gaming accomplishments and count the days to the release date of the next big game. Children who have let gaming become such an important component of their identity may initially feel lost amongst those who continue to play. Depending on the group they associate with, they may occasionally be teased or ridiculed for not being allowed to play.

Although *most* parents will respect your decision to ban video games and even be envious (“I wish I could do the same thing with my child”), you may encounter those who do not understand your decision or those who question your parenting skills. Not often, but occasionally I have worked with parents whose family and friends did not support their decision to impose a ban. They reported that others would sometimes make condescending remarks (“I don’t know *how* you could let it get so out of control”), imply parenting superiority (“I would never let something like this happen to *my* child”), or conclude that they were overreacting (“Let him play if he wants, my child plays and he is doing just fine.”). On the topic of peer pressure, at some point you probably told your child to do what he knows is right even if his friends disagree. The same advice applies to you. Listen to feedback and suggestions from others, but do not let them prevent you from doing what you know is necessary for your child.

Avoid Using the Word “Addiction” with your Child

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

This suggestion would be equally at home in the section on moderation but parents who have come to the point of banning video games may be more likely to use this word (or derivations of the word) with their child, which is why I have included it here.

To suggest that you not use the word “addiction”, “addictive”, or “addict” with your child may initially seem to be hypocritical. I have referred to this problem as an addiction and you may certainly believe that it qualifies as such given your child’s behavior. However, we need to keep our primary goal in focus (reducing your child’s gaming time) and not get sidetracked by semantics.

If you tell your child that he is *addicted* to video games, that games are *addictive*, or that he is a video game *addict*, you are assigning a label. When it comes from a mental health professional, labeling has pros and cons (some may call it a necessary evil). But, labeling from a parent does little to help the situation and may actually hurt the chances of helping a child. He may be insulted or hurt and conclude that his parent sees *him* as the problem rather the *behavior*. Of course, adults suffering from an addiction are encouraged to use the word and take responsibility for their actions and their recovery. With a child though, the parent takes control and the child does not need to admit that he is addicted for recovery to happen. Labeling the child’s behavior as an addiction and forcing him to accept the label thus serves little purpose. He will feel attacked, not supported. He will quickly take to the internet and discover that video game addiction is *not* an actual disorder and that some researchers believe that the term only serves to pathologize a harmless, normal behavior. Already you will be on the defense and will have to explain that although it is not *technically* a disorder, *you* believe that it is. Having to defend your decisions for a non-verified disorder is not a strong position to be starting in and should be avoided.

This does not mean that you should downplay the seriousness of the problem or how concerned you are for him. Instead of using the word “addicted” (which will sidetrack the conversation), I recommend that you keep it simple and use a phrase such as:

“I believe that you play video games far too much and this needs to change.”

This is not only more descriptive and less “diagnostic”, it is also much more difficult to argue against. Focus on changing the behavior, not on getting your child to accept the label.

Consider Counselling for Yourself, your Relationship, or your Family

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

Although I have previously discussed seeking help from a professional, this was always in reference to help for your child. The reality of any addiction is that it not only affects the individual, but also the members of his or her family.

As you already know, if a child is addicted to video games this impacts the overall functioning of the family. For example, as the addiction takes control of a child, parents may disagree about the approach that should be followed, may unintentionally undermine the other person's efforts, and may experience great frustration with their partner. Both may look to the other for answers, but neither may have the solution to the difficulties they are now facing. Over time the stress that comes from living with a child or teen who is addicted to video games will start to wear down even the strongest of marriages. Anger and frustration about the lack of progress will be directed towards the other partner. In order for parents to help their addicted child, they must be strong as a couple. The effort to remove games from an addict's life often requires an enormous amount of energy and strength, and it is not unheard of for marriages to end during this period. Therefore, you may wish to consider couple's therapy to help keep your relationship strong and also to assist you in making decisions about your child as a unified pair.

If you personally do not feel strong enough or knowledgeable enough to help your child to the extent that he requires, consider experimenting with individual counselling for yourself. When the video game addict is a child or minor, it is not absolutely necessary for *him* to be the person meeting with a psychologist or counsellor. In fact, in my own practice I spend more time working with parents to develop intervention strategies than I do with the actual child or adolescent who is addicted to video games.

A final option that may be appropriate for your situation is family therapy. As the name implies, family therapy involves multiple family members (at least one parent and child) and is focused on the relationship dynamics, interpersonal challenges, and communication styles of the family members. The therapist treats the family as a dynamic interconnected unit, and does not only focus on the identified individual with "the problem". Family therapy is concerned with how members interrelate, how the structure of the family has been created, and the functions of the roles adopted by parents and children. Family therapy can have benefits that extend far beyond helping a child overcome video game addiction, and if your family is willing, it can sometimes be the best choice for professional intervention.

Wilderness Camps and Inpatient Treatment Services

Helpful tip, strategy, or thought to use in my intervention plan?

I previously mentioned the possibility of timing a ban on video games with an event, situation, or environment where accessing video games would be more difficult for your child. If you have tried moderation with little success, have not found a psychologist who can provide effective service, have not been able to enforce a ban, and are more or less out of options for your addicted child, there is yet another option to consider: Wilderness camps and inpatient treatment services.

As childhood video game addiction becomes more problematic for parents, a number of specialized treatment services have appeared over the past several years. Some of the newer programs focus only on internet and video game addiction, while other services have incorporated interventions for video game addiction into programs that already existed. For example, a number of wilderness intervention programs for youth with behavioral or personal difficulties have started to offer service for video game addiction. Although there are many differences between the various programs, most involve an extended stay (30 – 60 days) away from home, absolutely no access to video games, intensive therapy with qualified mental health professionals, following a structured program designed to address the symptoms of withdrawal, a focus on accepting personal responsibility for one's life course, and developing other areas of interest outside the world of video games. Needless to say, these are very intense programs intended to break the grasp of the addiction (or other behavioral problems) once and for all.

The downside? There may not be a suitable program in your area and even if there is, they can be *very* expensive. For example, a 30 day stay may cost \$10,000 (or much more). For the vast majority of families, the astronomical fee for these treatment services is prohibitive. However, if your child remains helplessly addicted to video games despite your efforts *and* you have the financial resources for this kind of service, I have included a list of possible programs below for your review. If you follow this option, I strongly recommend that you contact the program and ask *many* questions before enrolling your child. In fact, I recommend that you physically visit the treatment location, talk to the director, talk to the clients if permitted, get a detailed description of the program, and make sure that you have a clear understanding of the program policies. Given the expense of these programs, there is no reason why they should not welcome your visit. If you are not permitted to evaluate the service to your satisfaction or if you do not believe that the program offers *exceptional* service (it should considering the expense), do not give them your business.

Note: Knowing that this type of program is not an option for most of the parents reading this book, I have provided a few thoughts on more affordable alternatives following the list below.

Disclaimer: The programs and services below are provided for informational purposes only. I am not specifically recommending or endorsing any of the programs and cannot comment on the claims, promises, or services provided. If you are interested in any of the following programs make sure to properly evaluate the suitability of the service and its claims before committing to the treatment. Note that this is only a sample of some of the programs currently available, not an exhaustive list.

Aspen Education Group

About: “Aspen Education Group is an organization that is committed to improving the quality of life for youth and their families. Aspen's programs exist at the intersection of therapy and education for students that have demonstrated behavioral issues that are interfering with their performance in school and life. Recognizing that every individual is different and challenged by different needs, Aspen offers a wide diversity of educational programs, settings and solutions that match client needs with the right learning and therapeutic environment. Through the 38 programs that Aspen operates in 13 states and the United Kingdom, parents can choose from a variety of therapeutic environments that include boarding schools, experiential outdoor education programs, and weight-loss residential high schools and summer weight loss camps.”

Website: <http://www.aspeneducation.com/>

Monarch Centre

About: “The Summer Wilderness Therapy Program at Monarch Center is designed to be intensive and extremely challenging. Our belief is that there are inherent qualities to wilderness settings that ultimately force students and families, as a whole, to examine their behavior. Our summer wilderness therapy program for troubled teens is a minimum of 30 days and a maximum of 90 days, with the average length of stay being approximately 60-80 days. Troubled teens and youths can earn academic credit in our summer program. Our summer wilderness therapy program runs from June 1st through August 31st and takes place in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado in such areas as Rocky Mountain National Park, the Arapahoe National Forest and the Great Sand Dunes National Monument. Students are admitted as space is available and on a rolling admissions basis. Group size is limited to 10 students and our groups tend to fill up prior to summer.”

Website: <http://www.monarchcentercolorado.com/index.html>

Aspen Institute

About: “Our mission is to provide psychiatric stabilization and comprehensive evaluation, assessment, treatment, and integrated prescriptive services for adolescents found eligible for treatment services by implementing effective, multidisciplinary diagnostic and treatment programs for troubled teens.”

Website: <http://www.aspenassessment.com/index.html>

Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery

About: “IAR services are available for men, women and adolescents. Our comprehensive staff of certified counselors is committed to helping persons with chemical and/or behavioral addictions lead a comfortable and productive life without the use of mood-altering drugs or compulsive behaviors. We achieve this goal by providing a variety of medical and counseling services designed to help both the patient and his or her family. Available care ranges from modern intensive medical treatment to prevention counseling.”

Website: <http://www.addictionrecov.org/default.aspx>

SUWS of the Carolinas

About: “SUWS of the Carolinas is a therapeutic wilderness program located in the woods of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina. Blending traditional therapeutic methods with a challenging outdoor environment, SUWS of the Carolinas focuses on assessment and clinical excellence. With an exceptional student-to-staff ratio, individualized treatment plans, and a positive peer culture, our wilderness therapy program is designed to address self-defeating behaviors as well as the underlying causes of those behaviors. The SUWS of the Carolinas clinical treatment team consists of licensed master's or doctoral level therapists who are passionate about working with struggling youth. They oversee student development and assist students and families in progressing toward their individualized treatment goals.”

Website: <http://www.suwscarolinas.com/>

Aspen Achievement Academy

About: “Aspen Achievement Academy is a licensed treatment program that integrates an accredited academic component, a sophisticated therapeutic model, and an experiential education curriculum in a healing wilderness environment. Aspen Academy recently participated in a landmark study of wilderness therapy that showed a dramatic improvement in teen behavior after participation in this type of program.”

Website: <http://www.aspenacademy.com/>

Turn-About-Ranch

About: “The Ranch setting takes defiant teens out of their comfort zone and reminds them that success is achieved through teamwork and cooperation, not through entitlement and manipulation. They learn that while they might feel entitled to get what they want, when they want it, in the real world rewards come through dedication and hard work. Turn-About Ranch differs from typical residential treatment centers for troubled teens because it values action – not just talk. During their time at the Ranch, students don’t only go to school and participate in therapy; they also take an active role in the daily running of a working ranch. They feed the chickens at dawn and bring in the cows before dusk – real-life experiences that enhance the therapeutic process by putting behavioral changes in action, which is much more effective than just talking about doing things differently. At Turn-About Ranch, once-troubled teens discover the great rewards of working within a family, developing trust toward one another, and earning respect. Real change happens on this historic horse and cow ranch as young people learn the value of a day’s work, experience the power of working in cooperation with others, and develop stronger senses of accountability, respect, and compassion.”

Website: <http://www.turnaboutranch.com/>

Restart Internet Addiction Recovery Program

About: “Video Game and Internet Addicts can now find solutions to the addictive behavior that devastates their marriages, careers, schooling, family life and health with the opening of reStart: Internet Addiction Recovery Program. The first of its kind in the US, reStart is a 45-day program located in Fall City, Washington, near Redmond (home of Microsoft) and Seattle. It is designed specifically to help internet and video game addicts overcome their dependence on gaming, gambling, chatting, texting and other aspects of Internet Addiction.”

Website: <http://www.netaddictionrecovery.com/>

Think creatively about more affordable options

If you have the financial means to send your child to a program similar to those described above, great! Hopefully this will be the solution you have been searching for. But, what if you like the idea of these programs but cannot afford fees ranging from \$10,000 - \$80,000? If your goal is to prevent your child from accessing video games following a ban by changing his surroundings, there are other options (with a bit of creativity). Of course these alternatives will not offer the same focused interventions, professional consultations, and intensity of a specialized wilderness camp. But, the change in surroundings and lack of access to games may still be quite beneficial. One option is to time the beginning of a ban (ideal, but not necessary) with the start of an extended stay at summer camp. You could also research leadership and skill development programs with local community organizations such as the YMCA (one of the advantages being that programs are offered throughout the year and not only in the summer). If he is currently failing or doing very poorly at school, you may be able to request a short leave of absence (a week or two) if you are able to find a program that takes him out of the home for a while (i.e., overnight camps). Especially during the initial weeks of the ban, whenever possible the goal is to break his normal routine, remove the cues to play, and give him the opportunity to put his energy into a more meaningful and healthy activity.

How to Proceed from Here

You have made it to the end of this workbook – congratulations!

This was probably a lot of information to digest and your head may be spinning now about how to proceed. I recommend that you take a bit of a break from the manual before proceeding. If this was your first reading, give yourself a few days to reflect on the tips, strategies, advice, and information provided. You may have a few ideas about how to proceed, but you do not need to make any decisions right this very moment. After a few days have passed, come back to this very point.

You can stop reading...now.

Welcome back. If you have only read through the manual one time, go back and reread the sections you checked (✓) along the way as possible tips and strategies for your intervention plan. Now that you have a better understanding of video game addiction and many of the possible options, you should be better able to evaluate the feasibility of these options for your particular situation. If necessary, go ahead and eliminate incompatible suggestions and the tips that, upon reflection, are not appropriate for your child. The points that remain will make up the first draft of your intervention plan. Remember that you will almost certainly revise this plan depending on how successful or unsuccessful it is.

Turn to page 220 (Intervention Summary Worksheet) and use these points to complete your first intervention plan based on the material in this workbook.

On page 223, you will find a worksheet that can be used with your child to clearly explain new rules, expectations, and conditions for video game play. If you wish, it can also be used as a signed contract between you and your child.

Thank you once again for your interest in this manual. By supporting this work, you provide great encouragement for all my current and future efforts to help the thousands of parents who, just like you, have (temporarily) lost a child to video game addiction.

For the actions you will now take to help your child, you have my utmost respect and sincerest wishes for a rapid recovery.

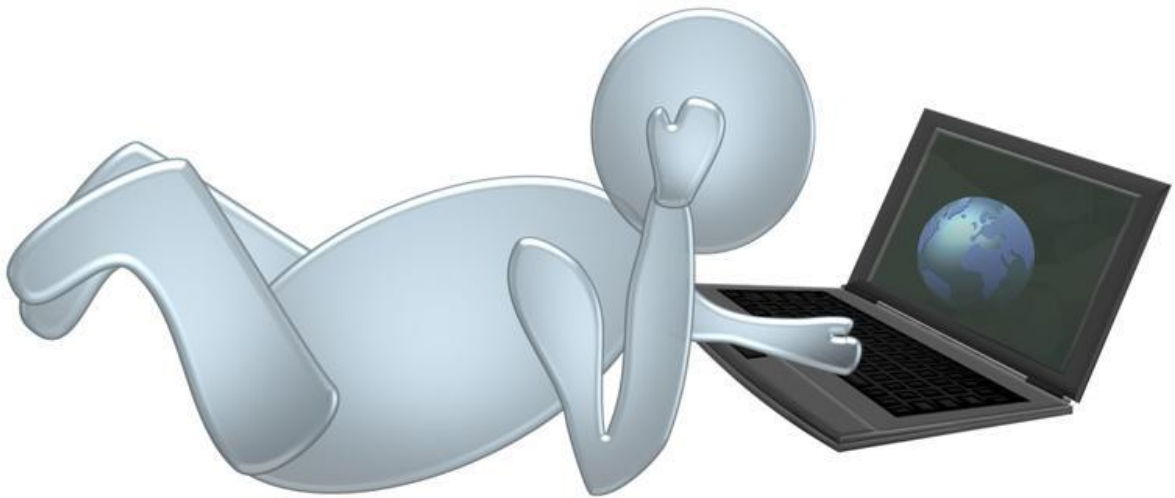
Dr. Brent Conrad,
Clinical Psychologist
www.TechAddiction.ca



October, 2014

PART VI:

Appendices



Intervention Summary Worksheet

Please complete this worksheet by referring to the corresponding information in other parts of this manual. You may need to print additional copies of page 213 as you modify your intervention strategies.

My child's favorite genres of video games are:

_____ and _____. According to pages 12 – 22, the “potential for addiction” for these genres are _____ and _____.

On an average weekday:

My child plays video games for _____ hours (page 54). He plays for approximately _____ hours (page 54) on an average day on the weekend.

On the video game addiction questionnaire: (page 43)

My child had a score of _____, which is in the _____ likelihood range for addiction.

The appealing elements of my child's favorite game are: (page 56)


How my child has been affected by video games: (page 57)

The two daily events that usually precede my child's gaming are: (page 58)

Two interventions from the past that would be worth trying again are: (page 67)

Two challenges that I anticipate as I proceed are: (page 68)

During this particular intervention, I am taking the following approach:

- 
- A) Moderation only: All games will still be permitted as long as play time falls within pre-defined limits and various other conditions are met.
- B) Game ban: The most problematic games will be banned. Other games will be subjected to time limits and various other conditions.
- C) Genre ban: The most problematic games and genres will be banned. Other games will be subjected to time limits and various other conditions.
- D) Total ban: All video games will be banned. The home will become a game-free zone.

If I am following a moderation, game ban, or genre ban approach, the maximum weekday gaming hours recommended for my child is _____ (page 84).

The maximum recommended hours per day on the weekend is _____ (page 84).

My intervention plan (refer to page 192 for a reference if needed) **will include the following tips, techniques, and strategies.**

Note: This includes items that are still checked after reviewing the workbook plus your own ideas and approaches. This list should be as specific as possible and action-oriented (e.g., "Reduce allowable gaming by 25% per week until the target number of hours is reached", "Ask friend to uninstall _____ from the computer and set up security software", "introduce a two for one rule", etc.).

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____
- 7) _____
- 8) _____
- 9) _____
- 10) _____
- 11) _____
- 12) _____
- 13) _____
- 14) _____
- 15) _____
- 16) _____
- 17) _____
- 18) _____
- 19) _____

New Rules for Video Games / Contract

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____
- 7) _____
- 8) _____
- 9) _____
- 10) _____

Consequences if the Rules are Broken

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____

_____ Signature of Parent / Caregiver	_____ Signature of Parent / Caregiver
_____ Signature of Child / Adolescent	_____ DATE