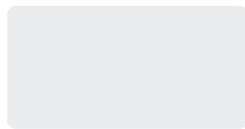


GET IN THE GAME

Setting boundaries around computer games is a much better idea than banning them, especially as some can be beneficial to their players.

By **Katrina Lobley**



START SELECT

As the father of three boys aged four, eight and 10, Dr Jeff Brand knows how hard it can be for parents to set rules about playing electronic games. As the electronic games expert from Bond University's Centre for New Media Research and Education, Dr Brand brings a lot of practical experience to the lessons that he preaches.

Dr Brand says it's important that parents try, whenever possible, to have a gaming session with their children.

"Families who play together tend to bond very strongly."

With 79 per cent of Australian households owning an electronic games device – which includes everything from PCs and handheld games to advanced consoles such as Sony's PlayStation3, Nintendo's Wii or Microsoft's Xbox 360 – Dr Brand is keen to spread the word on how to set effective game-playing guidelines.

Along with embracing a positive attitude towards games, parents should develop rules for the kids who are playing them – and stick to them.



THE RULES

STARTING GAME PLAY

"We need to understand there's no such thing as a mini-session," Dr Brand says. "Most games have a story and require somewhere in the order of 20 hours to complete. That means they're fairly complicated ... you can't just jump in for 10 minutes.

"In my house, we have a rule where you can either play for a half-hour or play for an hour, but your total screen time all day is two hours. We also have a limited number of goes in a day – you can only have two start sessions."

"The problem for parents is monitoring which child is on which device or is actually playing versus watching. Our rule is a simple one: if you're sitting there watching another person play, you're having screen time."

STOPPING GAME PLAY

"The stopping rules start with what I call a 21st-century bookmark," Dr Brand says.

Most games will either save the progress of the player automatically, or require them to go to a certain location in the game to save. "Most games have either ongoing saves, so you can stop the game and start where you left off, or you have to get to a place in the game – your character goes to a platform or whatever – and you can choose to save."

This is another reason parents should have a turn playing, to learn which ones have save points and which ones don't.

"My children understand that stopping is unconditional. We have a timer and when the timer beeps, they should be at a save point or within a couple of minutes of a save point."

Then there should be a follow-up activity, such as extending the game's creative world to the post-game activity by asking the child to draw a character, island or map from the game.

"It's a nice transition – it gets children to a desk or a table," he says. "If the next activity is

homework, that's probably pretty rough. It's really hard to go from playing Super Paper Mario on the Wii to working on your times tables."

If a child still doesn't want to stop play, Dr Brand says a simple hand on the shoulder is so much more powerful than yelling or screaming.

"One of the biggest mistakes we make as parents is we unplug. If you put your arm around the back of the child, it's a loving gesture – it's also an attention-getter. It's a gentle way to help the child break out of that world." ■



ELECTRONIC GAMES

The Pros

- Games can improve reading, writing and improve children's understanding of how stories work.
- Games can help maths skills by providing opportunities for counting, subtraction and other maths concepts.
- Games can help children to develop problem solving skills and improve hand-eye coordination when played in moderation.
- Games encourage children to explore the creativity of other worlds.
- Children can use game making software to develop their own games. This develops a range of skills including flexible thinking, reading and writing and problem solving.

The Cons

- Games are expensive. Encourage children to budget for a new game or encourage them to put it on their birthday or Christmas lists – prices will often fall as they wait.
- Children can get emotionally involved in the challenges and rewards built into each game – so ensure play is regulated.
- Many new game consoles include online access. Parents should apply the usual online safety rules.
- These games can take up a lot of children's time. Ensure their lives are balanced with other activities.

