

- Video games / Child development

A games approach to mental health

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Whether it's the pressure to excel in academics, the curated perfection of social media feeds, or a lack of time for unstructured outdoor play, children today face a unique set of circumstances that can potentially negatively impact their emotional well-being.

Fortunately, a new approach called gamification is emerging as a potential solution.

A games approach to mental health

The gamification of mental health education and intervention could have a positive impact, especially when it comes to children.

Pros and cons

Gamification involves applying game mechanics, such as points, badges, levels and competition, to non-game contexts.

For instance, a mental health app might reward users with points for completing mindfulness exercises or tracking their mood.

This approach leverages the intrinsic motivation that games often inspire to encourage positive behaviour change.

The positive aspects of gamification include:

- > **Engagement and motivation**
Imagine mental health activities becoming as captivating as a favourite game. Gamification can make these experiences more enticing and enjoyable, encouraging your child to actively participate in nurturing their mental well-being.
- > **Lifelong skill-building**
Games often involve challenges, rewards and progression. This structure can help children develop important skills like problem-solving, decision-making and perseverance in a safe, virtual environment.
- Some games or apps weave coping skills, resilience and emotional regulation strategies into their interactive experiences, equipping your child with valuable tools to navigate life's challenges.
- > **Mental health awareness**
Educational games can teach children about mental health topics like anxiety or depression, reducing stigma and encouraging them to seek help if needed.
- > **Motivation in motion**
With progress trackers, rewards and challenges,

> **Balanced engagement**
While they can be engaging, be wary of excessive reliance on gamified mental health interventions.

Do ensure your child doesn't neglect seeking professional help or other evidence-based treatments that could better address their needs when needed.

- > **Stress traps**
Watch out for overly-competitive challenges or aggressive reward structures, as these might inadvertently induce stress, anxiety or feelings of inadequacy, especially in children already grappling with mental health issues.
- > **Guarding against addiction**
For children prone to addictive behaviours, gamified interventions could potentially exacerbate issues by reinforcing compulsive engagement patterns. This requires careful monitoring of their behaviours by parents and other guardians.
- > **Superficial understanding**
Gamification may oversimplify complex mental health concepts, leading to a shallow understanding of underlying problems if entertainment value is prioritised over effectiveness.
- > **Access and equity**
Factors like socioeconomic status, digital literacy and disabilities can impact on gamified interventions. This is as not all children may have equal access or ability to engage with such interventions, potentially widening disparities in mental healthcare.

What and how

Gamification holds significant promise in addressing a range of mental health challenges in children, including:

- > **Anxiety and stress**
Games can teach relaxation techniques, stress management strategies and coping mechanisms in a fun and interactive way.
- For example, an app could guide children through breathing exercises while earning points for each successful attempt.
- > **Depression**
Gamified platforms can

foster a sense of accomplishment and motivation, which can be beneficial for children experiencing low mood.

They can also provide opportunities for social interaction and support.

- > **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**
Games that require focus, problem-solving and sustained attention can help children with ADHD develop these skills.
- > **Social anxiety**
Multiplayer games can provide a safe space for children to practise social interaction and communication skills.

The following are some of the types of mental health interventions gamification can provide:

- > **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**
Gamified apps can teach children CBT techniques like identifying and challenging negative thoughts, developing coping strategies and setting goals.
- > **Mindfulness and relaxation techniques**
Games can guide children through mindfulness exercises, deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.
- > **Social skills training**
Multiplayer games can help children develop empathy, cooperation and conflict-resolution skills.
- > **Mood tracking and monitoring**
Apps can allow children to track their moods over time, helping them identify patterns and triggers.
- > **Educational content**
Games can deliver information about mental health in an engaging and accessible format.

When using it

One example of gamification in mental health is the app Mood Meter.

This is a way of measuring and recording how someone is feeling during the day. It allows users to track their mood and complete activities to improve their emotional state.

Users earn points for completing tasks and can unlock rewards as they progress.

The app also includes educational content about emotions and coping strategies.

While gamification shows great potential, it's essential to use it as a complement to traditional mental health treatments and to monitor its impact on children's well-being.

By understanding both the benefits and limitations of gamification, parents, educators and mental health professionals can harness its power to support children's mental health positively and effectively:

- > **Balance is key**
Create a healthy balance between gamified activities and screen-free time for well-rounded development.
- > **Age-appropriate games**
Choose gamified apps and

games that are age-appropriate and cater to the specific needs and skills children are developing.

- > **Focus on learning**
Use gamification as a tool to enhance learning and skill development, and not just for entertainment.
- > **Play together**
Engage with children while they play gamified apps or games. This allows you to guide them through the challenges, discuss emotions and ensure positive experiences.
- > **Alternatives**
Explore non-digital alternatives that encourage similar skills and positive mental health practices.
- Parents, do stay involved in your child's engagement with gamified mental health tools.
- Monitor their usage, encourage breaks and initiate conversations about their experiences and feelings while using these apps.
- Educators, you can integrate gamified elements into classroom activities thoughtfully, ensuring they align with educational goals and support students' emotional well-being.
- Be mindful of individual differences and offer alternative options for children who may not benefit from gamified approaches.

While gamification holds promise in enhancing a child's mental health journey, it's essential for parents and educators to navigate this landscape with caution and mindfulness.

By understanding the potential impacts of gamification on children's mental health and taking proactive steps to mitigate risks, parents and educators can harness its benefits while safeguarding young minds against potential harm, ultimately fostering holistic well-being for their children.

Together, let's empower our children to navigate the digital landscape with resilience and mindfulness.

Vinorra Shaker is the associate head of Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation's (APU) School of Psychology. For more information, email starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only, and should not be considered as medical advice. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this article. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.

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> Lifelong skill-building

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Some games or apps weave coping skills, resilience and emotional regulation strategies into their interactive experiences, equipping your child with valuable tools to navigate life's challenges.

> Mental health awareness

Educational games can teach children about mental health topics like anxiety or depression, reducing stigma and encouraging them to seek help if needed.

> Motivation in motion

With progress trackers, rewards and challenges, gamified platforms can ignite motivation in your child, empowering them to set and conquer mental health goals, and fostering a sense of achievement and fulfilment.

> Building community

Through gamified platforms, your child can connect with peers facing similar mental health hurdles, share experiences and offer support.

This sense of belonging combats isolation and fosters a supportive environment.

Multiplayer games can foster social interaction, communication and teamwork skills, which are important for emotional well-being.

> Positive behaviour reinforcement

Gamification's immediate feedback, rewards and reminders can encourage your child to adopt healthier habits and coping mechanisms, thus nurturing positive behavioural changes rooted in the principles of psychology.

Unlocking new levels can provide a sense of accomplishment, and boost self-esteem and confidence.

Meanwhile, the negative side of gamification can include:

> Screen time

Overreliance on gamified apps and games can lead to excessive screen time, potentially impacting sleep, physical activity and social interaction in the real world.

> Balanced engagement

While they can be engaging, be wary of excessive reliance on gamified mental health interventions.

Do ensure your child doesn't neglect seeking professional help or other evidence-based treatments that could better address their needs when needed.

> Stress traps

Watch out for overly-competitive challenges or aggressive reward structures, as these might inadvertently induce stress, anxiety or feelings of inadequacy, especially in children already grappling with mental health issues.

> Guarding against addiction

For children prone to addictive behaviours, gamified interventions could potentially exacerbate issues by reinforcing compulsive engagement patterns.

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> Superficial understanding

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