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Are video games bad for children's health?

AS A NEW STUDY FINDS GAMING CAN DAMAGE KIDS' HEARING, LISA SALMON DISCOVERS WHAT OTHER RISKS – AND BENEFITS – THE PASTIME CAN POSE

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MOST children play video games – and many parents have concerns about it.



But while the office of the Children's Commissioner says the overwhelming majority of children (93%) in the UK play video games, it also points out that the popularity raises a number of concerns for parents, including children being able to talk to strangers or becoming the target of bullying.

And now there's another worry – a large new review has found video gamers, including children and teenagers, are at risk of irreversible hearing loss and tinnitus.

The review of 14 global studies involving more than 50,000 people found that sound levels on video games are often near, or exceed, safe limits.

The study, published in the journal BMJ Public Health, concluded that "gamers who are listening at highintensity sound levels and for long periods of time may be at risk of permanent sound-induced hearing loss and/or tinnitus".

So is this extra evidence that children and young people should be discouraged from gaming?

Not necessarily, says Dr Sangeet Bhullar, founder of WISE KIDS, which promotes digital literacy and wellbeing in children.

"Online gaming can have both health risks and benefits for children and young people," he stresses. "Risks can include disrupted sleep and increased aggression, with excessive gaming also being linked to attention problems and depression. Conversely, we also know

gaming can have benefits such as improving mood, promoting relaxation, reducing anxiety, and strengthening social connections, social and cognitive skills.

"The key here is balance and moderation, and ensuring children and young people have physically active lives with good friendships and support networks. Parental involvement is particularly important for parents of younger children, and gaming together can be a really important way to bond."

It's important for parents to be at least aware of the health risks. They include...

1. HEARING PROBLEMS

"One significant concern is the potential for hearing loss," says Christina Kourie, a clinical audiologist at Pindrop Hearing. "When exposed to loud gaming sounds or music through headphones for extended periods, your child's hearing may be at risk. Gamers often near, or exceed, permissible safe limits, which can cause permanent hearing loss in the near future."

She stresses it's crucial to monitor usage and volume in headphones.

2.

Overuse injuries of the hands and arms are "rampant" among gamers, says Dr Peter Grinspoon, an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School in the USA.

An example is carpal tunnel syndrome, which involves inflammation of a nerve in the wrist, causing pain and numbness. There's also 'gamer's thumb', which happens when the tendons that move the thumb become inflamed, leading to swelling and limited movement, and 'trigger finger', when a finger

REPETITIVE STRESS INJURIES

gets stuck in the bent position due to chronic inflammation.

3. OBESITY

A study published in the Journal of Clinical Nutrition found video game playing increases food intake in adolescents, and it concluded: "A single session of video game play in healthy male adolescents is associated with an increased food intake, regardless of appetite sensations."

Add to that the fact that teenage gamers are sitting in front of a screen for hours every day without getting exercise, and it's not surprising that obesity may be a risk.

4. DISRUPTED SLEEP

Various studies have associated gaming with sleep deprivation, insomnia and circadian rhythm disorders, and Dr Bhullar says: "A study published in Scientific Reports indicated that video gaming may disrupt sleep by displacing sleep time, leading to reduced sleep duration and delayed bedtimes."

He adds that another review, published in the Journal of Behavioral Addictions, reported that excessive use of video games is linked to sleep disorders and poor sleep quality.

5. ADDICTION

The number of people aged over 13 being treated for gaming disorders – when someone struggles to control how often they play video games – increased by more than half from 2021 to 2022, according to the National Centre for Gaming Disorders, whose founder and director Professor Henrietta Bowden-Jones says: "Gaming disorders can have a significant

impact on children and their family to the extent it can take over and stop them from living their normal daily life.

"From avoiding school or work, engaging in violence, to family breakdowns, the harms to those suffering can be significant; but there is help from the NHS for those who need it.

"We also know the earlier they are identified and treated, the more successful the outcomes will be for both the individual and also for the wellbeing of the family members."

6. IMPAIRED WELLBEING...OR NOT?

A 2022 University of Oxford study found that although many adolescents are spending considerable time gaming, it's not usually having a negative impact on their wellbeing.

The study's lead author, Dr Simona Skripkauskaite, says: "A growing body of recent evidence shows that direct links between time spent engaging with digital technology and adolescent wellbeing or mental ill-health are either nonexistent or weak."

She says her study found most 'heavy' gamers were experiencing no negative wellbeing effects, and 44% reported higher wellbeing than those who played games less or didn't play them at all.

"The few gamers whose wellbeing was poorer were more likely to be female and report gaming on their mobile phones," Dr Skripkauskaite explains. "They were also more likely to report previous experiences of abuse or anxiety and aggressive behaviours, suggesting that those with traumatic experiences and mental health issues may turn to gaming as a coping mechanism."