

Healthy Limits on Video Games

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How to prevent (or overcome) problems with gaming

Clinical Expert: [Nancy M. Petry, PhD](#)

The vast majority of children and adolescents in the United States play video games. Although many children play them in moderation, without adverse consequences, others become obsessed with gaming. Parents may become worried when a child is neglecting homework to play games, or is staying up all night gaming and is too tired to get up for school the next day. Some parents notice that their child rarely socializes in person with others and spends all free time on video games. Some children start to cover up how much they are playing.

In this excerpt adapted from [Pause and Reset: A Parent's Guide to Preventing and Overcoming Problems With Gaming](#), Nancy M. Petry, PhD, offers guidance on how to effectively limit gaming to a healthy level. Whether the goal is to prevent a child's gaming from becoming excessive, or to roll back play that seems out of control, Dr. Petry offers practical, parent-tested strategies for getting a handle on the role of video games in your child's life.

Setting and enforcing limits on games

For children and younger adolescents, and even for older adolescents under the age of 18, you as a parent should have the bulk of the say in determining appropriate limits to gaming. Having clear and consistent guidelines related to video games prevents excessive playing. However, two-thirds of US children and adolescents indicate that [their parents have "no rules"](#) related to time spent on media use. Be sure you are no longer part of that majority! Here are guidelines for limiting gaming for your child:

- 1. Remember that gaming should occur only *after* your child completes his other responsibilities for the day.** That should include homework and household chores. Be sure to check the quality and completeness of homework and chores prior to allowing your child to begin playing. Playing video games should be a privilege that is earned. Gaming is not an inalienable right!
- 2. Put clear limits on your child's gaming.** The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) suggests time allotted should be under 30 to 60 minutes per day on school days and 2 hours or less on non-school days. The group recommends even lower limits of under 1 hour of total screentime per day for [children under 6 years old](#), and they encourage parents to determine the appropriate amount of time for video games and other electronic media use for children over the age of 6. They provide [an online planner](#) to assist parents in deciding on screentime. Regardless of what limits you think are appropriate, **some days each week should involve no gaming.** It is crucial to ensure that your child develops, maintains, and enjoys other, non-screentime activities.
- 3. In designing your rules, consider a reasonable time frame for reassessment.** You can follow your plan for 1 or 2 months and then reevaluate it. Instituting a temporary change will result in greater buy-in than a permanent change. You may decide that the initial plan is too restrictive. You could then loosen it after a couple of months if your child is adhering to it and no problems are evident. Remember that it is easier to loosen restrictions than to tighten them.

4. Determine a realistic consequence for breaking the rules. The outcome for violating the rules must be enforceable and immediately applicable. You do not want to tell your 14-year-old child she cannot get her driver's permit when she is 16 if she breaks the rules next week. A more reasonable option is a complete ban on gaming (or media use more generally) for several days or weeks if she does not abide by the rules.

5. Make sure you know and approve of which games your child is playing. As a parent of a minor, you have the right — and the responsibility. Ask him directly or view web browsers if you are unsure. Find out about [his preferred games](#). In addition to setting rules about times for playing, you should also include rules related to the types of games allowed. You can and should prevent purchase and use of games with extreme violence or graphic sexual content.

6. Once you have established your rules, you must consistently monitor and apply them. You cannot allow your child to bend the rules when you are tired or distracted. You cannot apply the rules differently if your child feels ill or does not have any homework one day. Regardless of other issues that arise, you need to follow through with the consequences *immediately* if your child breaks the rules. You must feel comfortable with the plan you propose, and you must be committed, willing and able to follow through with it. If both parents are involved, both must be on board with the monitoring of gaming time and rules surrounding it.

7. Identify other recreational activities. Replacing gaming with other activities is critical to changing excessive gaming behavior. Your child is gaming in large part because she finds it fun and it is something she is good at. Gaming can be done virtually any time, with little planning or effort. Because many devices are used for other activities, a game is just one click — and one second — away. When your child has little else to do, games are always there to fill the time. To help your child fill free time, actively promote participation in [other recreational activities](#). Consider [activities that you and other family members can do with your child](#). The replacement of activities should be on the days of the week and during the times of the day when your child most often plays video games.

8. Offer positive reinforcement for non-gaming activities. Provide rewards to your child when he or she is involved in activities that do not relate to gaming. These rewards can be tangible, involving actual goods, services or even money. They can also be intangible, such as verbal praise or simply attention. You can replace gaming times with rewarding recreational activities, and these activities can also serve as rewards for not gaming. If your child has been gaming at a level that is causing harm, most likely one of the adverse consequences has been a worsening of your relationship with him. Positive reinforcement for non-gaming activity is one way to improve that relationship, and that can be rewarding to a child, too.

[Pause and Reset: A Parent's Guide to Preventing and Overcoming Problems with Gaming](#) is by Nancy M. Petry, PhD. Copyright © 2019 by Author and published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

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