

"It Listened!"

by

Sally Goldberg, Ph.D.

Q. It seems like a losing battle against video games. Every time I think I can talk my son out of playing one, he tells me about a new one he wants to buy. Is there any way to help our children break away from this addictive activity?

A. While this is not an easy or quick process, yes, there is a strategy that works.

Deborah, 25, told me about a favorite game she and her older sister, Cynthia used to play when they were little. In the back seat of the car, they used to compete with each other saying, "Red light, turn green." The winner was the one who said it at exactly the right time to see their command met. The winner could then proudly say, "It listened!" Imagine the pride they both felt being able to exert their power over the technology of an ever-changing and completely mechanical traffic light!

Sean, 17, told me about the video games he has played since he was little. While he has only a few at a time, he is always on the lookout for new ones. Getting ready to trade in *Bloodrayne II*, *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*, *Grand Theft Auto III*, and *Fatal Frame II*, he is saving for the new *Bully* videogame. He explained that he plays these games for hours each day—two, three, four, five, or even six or seven. It all depends how much time he has. They always give him something to do.

After talking to Sean and seeing him demonstrate the games on a full screen TV in his room, I began to get the picture. I could not help but see the distinct contrast between Deborah and Cynthia using their creativity to influence the traffic lights and Sean who used the creativity of the videogames to influence him. His teen-rated (T) ones were labeled "blood, crude humor, language, suggestive themes, and violence." His mature-rated (M) ones had even more disturbing descriptions.

Each person is a product of his or her experiences and consequent thoughts. What one does *not do* is just as important as what one *does*. If your child spends most of his or her time actively engaged with computers, TV, DVD's and videogames, then they are not spending most of their time doing interactive learning, playing sports, running, walking, hiking, biking, exploring, reading, writing, conversing, singing, or enjoying time with family and friends. His or her thoughts will be affected accordingly.

Strategy

There is a way to change the dynamics for young people like Sean. It is not easy or quick, but it is practical, and well-worth the time, effort, and fun that it takes. Here are some tried and tested suggestions.

1. Introduce a hobby.
2. Take a daily walk together.
3. Share a pleasant meditation.
4. Start collecting balls of all sizes, textures, and shapes. The set aside time each day to "play ball."
5. Leave time every evening to discuss the day and plan for tomorrow.

6. Have a family meeting from time to time.
7. Set up a craft table.
8. Listen to music together.
9. Go to a good movie or a show.
10. Plan a day at a spa.

Much of life today comes to children from the outside. Parents buy them many presents and give them many material things. They are all busy and find it difficult to carve out extra time to spend with their children. We acknowledge this and accept that there is no way to change these circumstances. Hopefully, the above suggestions will spark some new ideas. Some can be easily integrated into daily life. Others can be turned into gift certificates for the holidays and at other times. All should serve as reminders of the old days when a little personal time together went a long way. Happy New Year! I wish you and your family meaningful times together.



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