Managing Your Son's Use of Online Gaming.

Whatever our personal feelings are about gaming and online games, they are increasingly part of our children's (and therefore our) lives. This has especially been true since lockdown, when the connectivity of online games has allowed children to feel more socially connected. Research from Oxford University and other universities has suggested that there are actually some psychological benefits to gaming. Other suggested benefits are reported too; certain games are reported to develop problem solving and strategy skills.

However, we do, in school, see some pretty drastic downsides, especially with overplaying, and especially when children access content which they are not emotionally ready for. We see it as our collective responsibility, as parents and educators, to ensure boys are able to self-regulate and game safely. We also feel very strongly that whilst it is our duty to improve and support digital literacy, reading is still at the heart of good learning, so will continue to request that boys read every night.

In working with parents, we have found that gaming can become a dominant focus for our boys and therefore a source of concern and conflict at home. Games are designed to be addictive and are increasingly sophisticated. As a result, the desire to play continuously can become difficult to manage. Therefore, we are writing in order that we can support boys in learning to game sensibly and in moderation. We would like to write about how to spot the warning signs, and give some advice we have formulated through years of experience.

These are some of the negative behaviours you may see in your son if he is overusing online games:

- **Neglect of school work and other activities**
- **Obsessive behaviour** – always preoccupied with getting back to the game
- **Lack of sleep**
- **Lack of physical exercise**
- **Isolation emanating from a lack of direct social contact**
- **Having gaming as his main focus in life**
- **Lack of interest in reading and other hobbies that have educational benefit**
- **Irritability and annoyance when unable to play**
- **Guilt around the waste of time that could have been spent doing something productive**
- **Being deceitful** – excessive gaming can lead a boy to be dishonest or deceitful with parents about time spent gaming.

This environment can be challenging and create a stressful atmosphere at home. This guide may help you to manage the use of gaming so it can become a part of your son's life, but not his only main focus.

1. **Set agreed time caps for weekdays, weekends and holidays**:
   30- 60 minutes a day during the week is plenty and will allow a healthy balance where your son can get his time gaming. Have days with no screen time, too. At the weekends and during the holidays you may want to increase this, but continue to set

a realistic time limit of no more than 120-150 minutes per day and keep to it. Allow your son to manage this agreed time but know when it's time to turn it off for the day.

2. **Explain why you're limiting screen time:**
   If your boys understand that you're limiting your family's screen time because too much time spent on screens has downsides, they're much more likely to follow the rules you set. If they just think you "don't understand," they might be more likely to resist or break the rules you are trying to enforce.

3. **Set aside times to unplug:**
   Set aside times for your whole family to unplug from their devices. Dinnertime or 30 minutes before bedtime are two examples. When you all agree to set aside your devices, it gives your family the opportunity to spend thoughtful, quality time together. This will also allow time for the brain to calm down after all the stimulus before bed, encouraging a better night's sleep.

4. **Only allow age appropriate games, know what he is playing and with whom:**
   Based on what's appropriate for your son's age, explain why violent games, online shows and movies can be harmful. Even though boys may not realise themselves, it is not uncommon for these behaviours to then be trivialised and modelled. If your son uses the internet to play games, watch YouTube or socialise, make sure you have a conversation with them about the dangers of inappropriate content and online predators. And keep having this conversation.

5. **Educate yourself:**
   Our boys are tech-savvy. Most of them know more about electronics than we do. Parents need to stay up-to-date on the latest apps, games, and social media platforms, and trends. You can't teach your son about the risks of social media unless you understand the dangers yourself. However, we can teach them about ethics and real-world morality.

6. **Use parental controls:**
   There are tools you can use to protect your boys from accessing explicit content on the internet and online. Most routers, web browsers, and TVs have parental controls that you can set up to filter or block unwanted content. If your boys have smartphones, there are also built-in settings or apps you can download that allow you to create content filters. Many also allow you to block specific websites, web searches, or even keywords.

7. **Know your son's passwords and check their devices:**
   You might want to consider asking your son for the passwords to their online gaming and social media accounts. Children don't always have the maturity necessary to handle online interactions and can be vulnerable. You'll need to discuss the option as a family, but it will be up to you as the parent to work out the best way to help protect your son while still allowing them to have some privacy and autonomy. Many families do this, and we encourage you to discuss and agree with friends.

8. **Encourage other activities:**

With a wealth of apps, games, devices and content, it's easy for boys to become reliant on electronics for entertainment. Encourage your son to seek out and get involved in activities that don't need a screen. Playing outside, reading a book, or playing a board game are just a few ideas. It can also help to establish (and enforce) a schedule that everyone in your home follows. Making it clear to your son when they are allowed on screens and when they are not will help to clarify your expectations and can prevent arguments.

9. **Making screen time a privilege:**
Try to make screen time a privilege rather than a right. You can use a form of discipline that involves the taking away of privileges (negative consequences), such as your son's phone, laptop, or gaming system. However, once you've set a limit on how much screen time is allowed, don't allow your son to earn extra time as a reward. Instead, stick to the daily limit and offer other free or low-cost rewards to reinforce positive behaviour.

10. **Keep your son's bedroom screen free:**
You won't be able to monitor your son's screen use if they are able to use devices out of your sight. For this reason, it is advisable that screens and gaming of any kind are not allowed in your son's bedroom. This also includes handheld devices that your sons might be tempted to use late at night, which could interfere with their sleep. Phones should not be charged in bedrooms. If they need an alarm, we suggest that you get them one.

11. **Create "Technology-Free Zones":**
Establish zones in your house where electronics simply are not allowed. One example is your home's dining room or kitchen, which you could keep reserved for having meals and family conversations.

12. **Model healthy electronic use:**
Parents need to be role models of screen use for their children. Before you binge-watch your favourite Netflix series, remember that you are setting an example for your kids with your own time spent in front of a screen. Keeping the TV on for background noise all the time or scrolling through your phone any time you have a spare minute may not be modelling the screen-related behaviour you hope to see in your son.

These suggestions obviously must be used to fit with your family routine and it is not easy. Established routines and habits may be difficult to change, but negotiation and open discussion is a useful starting point. Some families may feel no electronics in the week is sensible, others not. These ideas are a mere guide to help parents who are finding regulating gaming usage at home a challenge. If you can apply these and be consistent, you will find your son has a much healthier relationship with his devices and with the wider world. Please access the link here if you wish to read further on this and on other related concerns.