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WELL

Moving Beyond Joysticks, and Off the Couch

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

As a new parent eight years ago, I swore never to buy a video game system, certain that my child would spend her leisure time reading and playing outside.

I recently remembered this vow while waiting in line for two hours outside the Nintendo store in Manhattan. Like hundreds of other parents, I was trying to get my hands on the Nintendo Wii, a popular video game system and one of the season's hottest toys.

My conversion from video game critic to buyer is due in large part to some recent research showing that so-called active video games, like those played on the Wii, aren't like the sedentary games played by the Atari generation. Far from creating couch potatoes, these games compel players to dance, jump and sweat.

While the active video games are clearly an improvement, excessive video game playing by kids is still cause for concern. Exposure to violent video game content is linked with aggression and antisocial behavior, and game playing has been shown to have a small but still measurable impact on time spent reading and doing homework for certain children.

Active video games are not a substitute for sports and outdoor play, but several studies show that the games can significantly increase a child's level of activity while playing indoors.

In one New Zealand study, researchers studying game use by 21 children showed that active video games produced about as much activity as walking, skipping and jogging, according to the report in August in [Pediatric Exercise Science](#).

Some of the new active video games burn more [calories](#) than walking on a treadmill, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) reported last year in its medical journal. In that study, researchers at the [Mayo Clinic](#) in Rochester, Minn., measured how many calories kids burned in 15 minutes of watching television, walking on a treadmill, playing a traditional seated video game (Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure) or playing two active games. One of the active games, Dance Dance Revolution, requires players to follow steps using a dance pad, while Nicktoons Movin' [Jellyfish Jam](#) uses the Sony EyeToy, which is controlled by body movements.

The EyeToy game burned about as many calories as walking on the treadmill, while dance pad users burned even more. The Mayo Clinic group is conducting a similar study of the Nintendo Wii.

Lorraine Lanningham-Foster, assistant professor at the Mayo Clinic, knows that the research into active video games will meet with skepticism. "There are people who think, no matter how you repackage it, they are still video games and kids shouldn't be sitting down in front of the TV or a computer to play them," Dr. Lanningham-Foster said. "But they're not sitting down. That's the whole aspect of these new games — they are moving."

A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that half of all 4- to 6-year-olds had played video games, and one in

four played several times a week. Fisher-Price has introduced an active game system for 3- to 6-year-olds called the Smart Cycle. The cycle, the 13th most popular toy on Amazon.com, allows the child to control a video game by pumping the pedals.

The bigger worry for many parents isn't whether kids are getting enough exercise, but whether video games interfere with real sports activities and time with friends and family or distract children from academic pursuits.

Researchers from the University of Texas at Austin looked at how nearly 1,500 adolescents and teenagers, ages 10 to 19, spent their time, and compared the habits of video game players with nonplayers. (The data were collected in 2002 and 2003, before the new active games were popular.)

Over all, there were no significant differences between gamers and nongamers in the time they spent with parents and friends, or involved in sports or other active leisure activities, according to the report in July in *The Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*.

Among girls, video-game play had no effect on reading time. But for every hour a boy played a video game during the school week, he read just two minutes less than a boy who didn't play video games. Notably, nongaming boys didn't read much at all either — spending only eight minutes a day with a book.

Video games didn't affect boys' homework time. But girls who played video games during the week spent 13 fewer minutes on homework, representing about one-third less time, than nongamers. But the meaning of that finding is not clear, as high-academic achievers often spend less time on homework as well.

Researchers say far more study is needed to understand what type of children play video games and how time spent playing games affects other parts of their lives. "The notion is, if kids weren't watching TV and playing video games they'd be reading or outside running up and down a soccer field," says Elizabeth A. Vandewater, a co-author of the Texas study who is now a senior research health analyst at Research Triangle Institute, a social science group in North Carolina. "It's not an even trade-off."

The American Academy of Pediatrics says children under 3 shouldn't spend any time in front of the television or video games. And parents who do buy active video games should still make sure that a child's overall media [diet](#) of computer use, television, videos and games does not exceed the academy's recommendation of less than one to two hours a day.

"As a parent, you still have to regulate and monitor what they're doing," Dr. Lanningham-Foster said. "It still boils down to limits."

E-mail: well@nytimes.com.

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