

No, Fortnite Isn't Rotting Kids' Brains. It May Even Be Good for Them



The popular video game holds promise, but adults should keep on top of kids' online behaviors

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Kids around the country, if not the world, have spent the last two year mimicking Fortnite dances, discussing Ninja's scoperless-sniper rifle shots, and are generally obsessed with the popular video game. Is Fortnite something we should be concerned about? What does research say about this latest kid obsession?

As researchers, educators, gamers, and parents whose kids play Fortnite, we see little to be concerned about with the game, but some things that could be encouraging. Playing video-game shooters, we now know, **is not a major contributor to youth violence**. Granted, kids' enthusiasm for Fortnite can be a little much, but we are old enough to remember playing classic shooters like Golden Eye or even Halo in a similar way.

For kids, coming home and playing Fortnite is very similar to playing army men in the woods and building forts. From purely a safety standpoint, playing digital laser tag is probably safer than having crabapple battles with garbage can lids as shields like we did, or shooting each other with BB guns, which lead to some nasty injuries.

In fact, as a play experience, there are parts of Fortnite that may even be valuable. Fortnite is, in many respects, a classic “third place” area—a place that is neither home nor school, but where kids can socialize and play beyond the watchful eyes of parents or teachers. These are places where kids learn to negotiate conflict, become independent, and explore what kind of person they want to be. They are important experiences that we too often design out of our kids’ lives through **structured** activities and all of the shuffling back and forth we do in today’s busy world. Kids need areas where they can hangout without parent’s constantly managing the activity.

Can we really blame kids for being so taken by Fortnite? The game itself—a combination of army guys, building forts, and king-of-the-hill battles—would have taken place with sticks or toy guns in the vacant lots or wooded strands that are increasingly designed **out** of today’s suburban neighborhoods. Further, many children do homework or are engaged in extracurricular activities until long after the pole lights come on, which means that online spaces are the last available place to socialize with others.

This isn’t to say that we should just let kids go it alone online. Recent news highlights how racism, xenophobia, and bullying have come out of the shadows and are thriving online. It’s more important than ever that we talk with kids about what is appropriate behavior, what’s acceptable humor—and what’s not.

Rather than focusing on what games kids are playing, we should attend more to who they are meeting and gaming with online, what type of talk they are engaged in, and what kinds of groups they are becoming a part of. Online peer groups can lead to strong, lasting friendships, but they can also be toxic and evolve in less healthy directions—just like offline ones. As with most issues around education, we hesitate to give rigid advice, other than this: Get to know and stay connected to your kids, make spaces for them to write or read around their interests, and engage them in conversations around their gaming whenever possible. Many young people are eager to talk about their games and can be brought into conversations about how to manage their gaming productively.

So, the next time your students are talking with you about a game they’re enjoying, make sure that you pay attention. It’s a great opportunity to see what they’re interested in and what you might be able to use with them in the classroom.