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Study: Playing Video Games Generally Not Harmful to Boys' Social Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Time Spent Gaming and Social Competence in Children: Reciprocal Effects Across Childhood

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The popularity of interactive video games has sparked concern among parents, educators, and policymakers about how the games affect children and adolescents. Most research on the effect of gaming on youth has focused on problematic gaming and negative effects like aggression, anxiety, and depression. A new longitudinal study conducted in Norway looked at how playing video games affects the social skills of 6- to 12-year-olds. It found that playing the games affected youth differently by age and gender, but that generally speaking, gaming was not associated with social development. However, the authors did find that 10-year-old girls who played games frequently had less social competence than 12-year-olds than girls who played less frequently.

The findings come from researchers at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), NTNU Social Research, the University of California, Davis, and St. Olav's Hospital in Norway. They are published in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Our study may mitigate some concerns about the adverse effects of gaming on children's development," says Beate Wold Hygen, postdoctoral fellow at the NTNU and NTNU Social Research, who led the study. "It might not be gaming itself that warrants our attention, but the reasons some children and adolescents spend a lot of their spare time playing the games."

The researchers studied 873 Norwegian youth from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds every two years for six years when the children were ages 6 to 12. The children (when they were 10 and 12) and their parents (when the children were 6 and 8) reported how much time the youth spent playing video games—using tablets, PCs, game consoles, and phones. The youth's teachers completed questionnaires on the children's and adolescents' social competence, including measures of cooperation, assertion, and self-control. And the youth told researchers how often they played games with their friends.

The researchers took into consideration several factors:

- Gender, because boys tend to spend more time gaming than girls and may be more likely to display lower levels of social competence;
- Socioeconomic status, because youth from less advantaged families may be at greater risk of problems that influence social competence;
- Body-mass index (BMI), because higher BMI in girls is associated with more gaming and youth with higher BMIs tend to have more problems with social competence, and
- Amount of time youth spent gaming with friends, since those who play games with friends have more opportunities to practice social skills than youth who play alone or online with strangers.

The study findings suggest that:

- Time boys spent gaming did not affect their social development.
- Girls who spent more time playing video games at age 10 developed weaker social skills two years later than girls who spent less time playing games.
- Girls who play video games may be more isolated socially and have less opportunity to practice social skills with other girls, which may affect their later social competence.
- Children who struggled socially at ages 8 and 10 were more likely to spend more time playing video games at ages 10 and 12.

“It might be that poor social competence drives youth’s tendency to play video games for extensive periods of time,” suggests Lars Wichstrøm, professor of psychology at NTNU, who coauthored the study. “That is, youth who struggle socially might be more inclined to play games to fulfill their need to belong and their desire for mastery because gaming is easily accessible and may be less complicated for them than face-to-face interactions.”

The study’s authors caution that the youth in the study provided researchers with an average of a limited amount of time gaming, and that the measure of gaming, as reported by the youth and their parents, may be imperfect given the difficulty of estimating time spent playing video games.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, *Time Spent Gaming and Social Competence in Children: Reciprocal Effects Across Childhood* by Hygen, BW (Norwegian University of Science and Technology [NTNU] and NTNU Social Research, Belsky, J (University of California, Davis), Stenseng, F (NTNU), Kvande, MN (NTNU), Skalicka, V (NTNU), Zahl-Thanem, T (NTNU Social Research and NTNU), and Wichstrøm, L (NTNU Social Research, NTNU, and St. Olav's Hospital). Copyright 2019 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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