When virtual playgrounds rule, what role do they play in our kids' well-being? And how do we make them safe and healthy?

-By Samira Sine and David Kirsch

As we see technology [television, video games, computer time] playing a prominent role in our children's education and socialization, it is vitally important to balance the tech time with daily movement and physical activity.

"Every child has a personal, inner principle of pace that drives his or her physical and cognitive development, and that must serve as the foundation for any effective conditioning program." (~ quote the author?)

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Online gaming is at an all-time high, and kids are using the activity to interact with friends and stay socially connected.

While the research rightfully gives parents reason for concern around video games, if balanced with structured breaks, offline activities, and set up in an age-appropriate manner, there are benefits to these newly popular virtual playgrounds.

Experts, researchers, and educators all agree that virtual playgrounds help children stay in touch with friends and remain socialized.

While addiction is a growing concern, there are also some positives. In this article, we explore the benefits of online gaming and socialization. There are steps parents can take to keep their children safe, and also ways to balance hours online with physical breaks that make screen time healthier.

What exactly is a virtual playground?

Interacting in a virtual playground with friends provides kids with tools for growth while also helping them avoid loneliness. We've explored the pros and cons of this trend, as games like Roblox and Minecraft see their usage rise exponentially and multi-player versions rule the day. With the pandemic exacerbating loneliness and social isolation for kids, gaming, in moderation, is emerging as a winner. We discuss what to play up and how to keep these spaces healthy, safe and educational.

The Playground Landscape:

The virtual playground is a place where children play video games with friends while chatting. These activities gained major momentum when schools were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Interactive video games created a virtual space for children to play and socialize. And while this activity counts as screen time, research shows that not all screen time is equal. Since parent's don't play videos games much, it's easy to gloss over some of the benefits. We suggest you play with your child and get to know how they navigate this virtual playground.

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Let's look at some of the benefits and then discuss how to keep children safe and provide the critical balance they need to optimize their time online.

1. Video games create virtual spaces for children to re-connect with friends

2. These games are considered to be 'active' consumption of media because kids don't just stare at a screen. It requires visual, auditory, and often physical coordination

3. Gaming can improve problem-solving skills
This is a common benefit of video game playing, as children have to follow rules, tackle new problems, and make split second decisions that could translate into developing positive real life skills.

4. Games improve memory
Children learn how to master constantly changing rules and instructions while focusing on achieving their outcome.

5. Games Improve attention and concentration
Children have to focus hard to achieve new levels, impress their friends and also unlock creative centers in their brains. They learn multi-tasking to achieve specific goals.

6. Games Improve social skills
Online gaming enables many players to engage in a particular game simultaneously. As such, there is constant communication between the players. This results in the development of meaningful as well as casual relationships among them. Further, this type of online interaction helps players meet new friends while also strengthening bonds with their old friends.

In general, play is associated with multiple health benefits for kids, including reducing stress and other negative effects of COVID-19 (i.e., depression, feelings of of loneliness; see Kowert, 2015). Within the physical spaces and social eco-systems that children usually inhabit, non-gaming activity is one way to improve that relationship, and that can be rewarding to a child, too.

Samira's 5 tips

1. Basic Rules for Kids: Video games require similar privacy settings that the Internet requires. Video games today are played online and your child could end up playing with strangers. It is vital to set up ground rules for your children at home. Every

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device, video game and app comes with privacy settings and controls. We will deep dive into how to set these up, in detail, via video webinar.

2. It is still critical to learn about the privacy settings for each game and device you purchase for your child. Once a child has seen something online that is developmentally inappropriate, there is no going back. Children can run into online predators who hide behind misleading photos and names.

3. Power up on passwords and teach your child never to share their passwords with anyone else, even close friends.

4. Make sure you choose video games that are age-appropriate for your child. Many video games contain violence, graphic images, and bad language. Learning about the game is important. Today there are many safe sites that list the age-ratings on video games.

5. Play video games with your child. If age-appropriate and set up safely, video games provide countless benefits to children.

David's 5 points:

Childhood fitness is just as important as:

- Academics
- Technology
- Nutrition
- Sports

The Ultimate Guide to Family Wellness:

Model the behavior you want to promote in your home.

- Turn off the television! Get up and move. Family walks, jogs, and bicycle rides are a great place to start.
- Nutrition walks to the grocery store: Each family member can be responsible for shopping for ingredients for a meal.
- Introduce your children to the kitchen and let them help you prepare meals.
- Daily family time: Set aside time each day (no matter how short) to do something physical with your kids.
- Family Events: Get the whole family together to enter a 5K race.
- Make fitness fun! Relay races, treasure hunts, chair squats, jump rope, dance parties

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The bottom line:

We are our child's first and greatest role models.

This is part of our series where we support parents and educators in their journey to raising a more mindful, healthy, and balanced generation of young people. Our goal is to do some of the heavy lifting, make action plans for your child's increasingly tech-filled world and give you practical, easy-to-implement plans for families and kids of all ages and stages.

David Kirsch is a fitness expert, 6 time best-selling-author of books including *Ultimate Family Wellness and Sound Mind, Sound Body.* He also takes credit for keeping some of the most famous faces and bodies in the world fit and healthy, using a combination of both mindfulness and movement.

Samira Sine was a BBC TV and Reuters journalist for over a decade, before becoming Regional Director for Common Sense. She currently is a Special Advisor to Common Sense and hosts a travel show and food show on the Discovery Networks. She is currently being certified in ..... _____ (?)

Both Samira and David are parents who co-founded Just For The Children to help kids bring movement and mindfulness into their lives, as they navigate the dizzying pace of today's digital world.

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References:

Pause and Reset: A Parent's Guide to Preventing and Overcoming Problems with Gaming by Nancy M. Petry, PhD. Copyright © 2019 by Author and published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

Nancy M. Petry, PhD., was a behavioral scientist who conducted research on addictive disorders and a professor of medicine at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine.