

THE AUTISM NOTEBOOK™

**Family Resource
for Autism and
Related Disabilities**

- Education
- Acceptance
- Inspiration

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South Florida Edition**

— Getting Unplugged HELPING KIDS DISCOVER LIFE OUTSIDE THE BLUE SCREEN

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Spending excessive time with electronic technology can be an issue for all students - with or without autism. But individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are at particularly high risk for two big quagmires—spending too much time on videogames and other electronic technology and being unable to disengage when the time comes. Both generate a cascade of negative consequences, including increased social isolation and family conflict and decreased opportunities to socialize and practice interaction skills. Academics, hygiene and physical health can also deteriorate as a result of extended use of technology.

A PERFECT STORM

In individuals with ASD, many powerful forces converge to make a perfect storm. Perseveration, inflexibility and cognitive rigidity are hallmark features of the disability. Video games and other media are intensely rewarding. They allow users to self-soothe and self-regulate, boost self-esteem with welcome experiences of competency and place little demand on (weak) social skills. The fast pace and intensely stimulating nature of video games appeal to individuals who also have attention deficits. These factors set the stage for compulsive use and overuse.

THE FAMILY SUFFERS

Parents try lecturing and logic, begging and pleading, threats and guilt. They feel angry, confused and inadequate in the face of these spiraling, no-win scenarios. They are bewildered by the tantrums, tears, defiance and near panic they see in their son or daughter. Family relationships are undermined by the increased strife and reduced social opportunities, which affect the entire family.

WHAT TO DO?

Adjust your beliefs!

- Change your mindset and radically accept that what you are currently doing isn't working.
- Embrace the idea that creating motivating (rewarding) alternatives will work better than punishment.

Generate a list of alternatives

- Engage your son or daughter in making a list of alternative leisure activities they would be willing to try.
- Create natural incentives for completing the list by making the activity fun, engaging and visually appealing.
- Require that he or she complete the list to re-gain access to preferred electronics.
- Engage the entire family in supporting this project.
- Non-athletic activities such as chess, theatre, drawing, collecting or reading, and non-team sports such as swimming, fencing or track may be rewarding.
- Repetitive or structured activities, such as a gym work-out, may appeal more than unstructured activities.
- Consider sensory factors.
- Draw on skills, such as rote memory, fact gathering and music.

Help your son or daughter choose 1-3 items from the list

- Work together and make it fun.
- Assist with practical considerations such as budget, time and motor skills, ability to follow rules and tolerance for competition.
- Remind them of their special talents and skills.
- Incentivize your child or teen by granting access to preferred activities once 1-3 items have been selected.



Pair natural incentives with chosen leisure activities

- Walking or hiking can be paired with a healthy snack or the promise of a surprise, such as a new joke or new music on the iPod or, if the activity is swimming, a fluffy new towel with a preferred logo on it.
- Use tangible incentives—points can be earned toward something he/she wants by participating in the new activities. Be sure to build in face-to-face time with a parent.

AND HERE'S THE PUNCHLINE...

Flip the status quo. Parents should take ownership of the electronics with the use of parent control systems. Explain to your child that he/she will earn controlled access by participating in the new, chosen activities. For example, if he agrees to try swimming twice a week, then he earns access to his preferred electronic device X number of minutes per week. Finalize the deal, but keep the upper hand.

DO YOU NEED SOME HELP?

Many parents can easily set up a behavioral program to help their child "unplug" on their own. Other parents may decide to seek out the support of a behaviorally oriented psychologist or other mental health professional if they're not sure what to do. If the latter describes you, don't be afraid - help is out there; ready and willing.

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References:

- * Links: Parental controls over electronic technology; Nintendo Game Systems: Wii, Nintendo DS; X-Box 360; Playstation Game Systems: Playstation, Vita; Apple Products: iPad, iPhone, and iPod Touch
- * Plugged in: Electronics use in youth and young adults with autism spectrum disorder. MacMullin, JA, Lunskey, Y, Weiss, JA (2016) Autism vol. 20(1) 45-54.