

'Fortnite' survey shows kids are playing in class. So what can parents do?

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If getting the kids and teens in your home to disconnect from "Fortnite" feels like a battle royal, take just a little bit of comfort. Parents, you are not alone.

Not that that's going to completely relieve your stress over the widely popular third-person shooter game, played by over 200 million mostly obsessed people, your kids very likely among them. The game can be played solo or in teams or squads as part of a multiplayer match known as "Battle Royale."

Kids play "Fortnite" in class when they should be paying attention to their teachers. They play on phones, tablets, PCs, Macs and on video game consoles hooked up to wall-size TVs.

What's more, when they play, they may be chatting up strangers, exposed to (cartoonish) violence and taking in inappropriate language. And, oh yeah, they're playing at the expense of doing their homework or engaging in physical activities.

While free to play, the kids are also spending gobs of money. Publisher Epic Games has made at least \$1.2 billion on the sale of V-Bucks, the in-game currency used to purchase dances (which are called "emotes"), skins and custom outfits for your in-game alter-ego.

"There is no question that 'Fortnite' is the biggest pain point in terms of media and tech for kids today, and certainly their parents," says Jim

Steyer, CEO of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit advocacy group for kids and families. "In the big picture, media and tech are designed to be addictive, period. This is emblematic of the fact that kids and teens are living their life on devices and online."

To get a better handle on the cultural phenomenon that "Fortnite" has become, and its impact, Common Sense teamed up with SurveyMonkey and in October polled a national sample of 19,063 adults—including 2,111 parents with children between 8 and 17 years old—and 1,348 teenagers ages 13 to 17.

Among the high-level results of the Common Sense study, which have been released exclusively to USA TODAY and timed with the launch of "Fortnite" Season 7, about 1 in 5 parents find it at least moderately difficult to get kids off the game, and about a quarter say they're concerned about how much time their kid is playing.

Meantime—and this has especially got to be a bummer for you moms and dads to hear—27 percent of teens admitted that they were playing "Fortnite" in the classroom.

Heck, when you were 15, you'd have probably preferred surviving "Battle Royale" than geometry, too. But the issue is serious for parents and educators. "This is something that we have to deal with. This isn't a small story; this is a big story," says Jon Cohen, director of research at SurveyMonkey, commenting on the classroom revelation.

There's good news, too

Fortunately, there are glass half-full results in the survey, too: Half of the teens revealed that "Fortnite" helps them keep up with friends, and half say it helps with teamwork. Another 44 percent say they've made a friend online while playing, and 39 percent say they've bonded with a

sibling.

Yes, teen girls (47 percent) play as well, though not as often as their brothers (75 percent). And about 22 percent of boys play at least once a day, compared to 9 percent of girls.

As popular as "Fortnite" is, 61 percent of the teens overall say they've played, but the percentage is lower compared to the teens who say they use Snapchat (73 percent) and Instagram (74 percent), albeit in a prior survey.

Still, Cohen calls the number of kids playing "Fortnite" "staggering" and a phenomenon given the game's recent emergence.

Adds Steyer: "This is the arms race for kids' attention, and whether it's 'Fortnite' or Instagram, the tech industry is winning."

But is this really all that different from generations past with eyes glued to TV screens instead of handheld, portable screens? Actually, Steyer says, yeah.

"The scientific studies about the impact on brain development, etc., between video games or online and social media versus you sitting there and watching 'Hogan's Heroes' is a totally different experience," Steyer says. "And, by the way, most people didn't spend eight hours in a row just watching 'Gilligan's Island' or 'Let's Make a Deal.' "

Establish limits

So how can parents divert Junior's attention away from "Fortnite"? One tip is to play the game yourself, something 1 in 5 dads has already done compared to 18 percent of moms. You might end up having a nice bonding experience with your kid while discovering the tricks of the

game and just what it is you are up against.

Whether you play or not, set clear limits, which might vary depending on how your kid plays. "Fortnite" has a "playground mode" that allows players to "respawn" or come back to life; in that mode, set limits by time. The length will vary by family, of course, but something reasonable would be a half-hour to 90 minutes a day, with the higher limit reserved, say, for the weekend.

Meanwhile, if your kids are engaged in a "Battle Royale," you might also limit gameplay by the number of "rounds."

Either way, tell your kids they can't play after a certain hour of day and don't let them take a device to bed. In fact, some parents might choose to let their kid play only in a common space of the house.

"It requires active parenting. You just cannot sit there on the couch and ignore this," Steyer says. "And, by the way, if they don't follow the rules, take 'Fortnite' (or the phone) away ... for two weeks ... It's torture, but too bad. And they do get the message."

Other options for parents: If you're worried about your kid talking to strangers, don't give them the headset they would use for that purpose.

Common Sense also directs parents to settings within "Fortnite" to limit conversations to people whose handles the kids know. You can also turn off voice chat. And if all else fails, impose the parental controls that are on the phone or computer the kid uses to play or that may be part of your Wi-Fi router.

It remains to be seen whether "Fortnite" can sustain its popularity long term, but even if it fades, expect something else to capture your kid's fancy.

"There will be something after 'Fortnite,' " Steyer says. "This is the story of kids' lives today and our lives, and we have to come to terms with that." ____

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