

Parents who play Pokemon GO with kids: 'It wasn't really about the Pokemon'

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Parents who played Pokemon GO with their children reported increased exercise, outdoor experiences and family bonding. Credit: University of Washington

Parents who regularly play "Pokémon GO" with their children report a number of side benefits from playing the mobile device-based game, including increased exercise, more time spent outdoors and opportunities for family bonding, according to new University of Washington research.

In the first study to survey and interview [parents](#) who play "Pokémon GO" with their families, some parents said the interactive and mobile nature of the game—in which players capture fictional creatures from the Japanese Pokémon franchise on smartphones and other mobile devices by "finding" them in real-world locations—made them feel better about engaging in that type of gameplay, as opposed to more sedentary forms of "screen time."

The results, taken from a qualitative survey of 67 parents and interviews with 20 additional parents playing "Pokémon GO" with their families in a Seattle park, are detailed in a [paper](#) to be presented at the Association for Computing Machinery's CHI 2017 conference in May. The study did not include perspectives of parents who do not allow their [children](#) to play Pokémon GO, which is an important avenue for future research.

Some guilt among Pokémon GO-playing persisted, and many set limits to prevent kids from becoming so absorbed in the game that they ignored cars or other real-world hazards, as well as responsibilities. Those included setting time constraints, requiring kids to do chores or homework first, shutting down the mobile device if kids didn't give it back when asked or parents staying in control of the smartphone while the family played.

Yet many parents—particularly moms of boys, fathers of girls and parents of teenaged children—reported spending more quality time with their children as a result of playing "Pokémon GO" together and talking more than usual, both about the game itself and about other things in

their lives.

Parents also appreciated how the game motivated both them and their children to go outside and exercise in ways that were convenient and fit into their lives, as their children displayed newfound enthusiasm for walking the dog or walking rather than driving to dinner or playgrounds. For some participants, these "Poké-walks" led to walking thousands more steps per day, and one father reported that his 11-year-old daughter had lost 12 pounds.

"Location-based augmented reality games are pretty different than sitting in front of a TV or playing a typical video game, so we were interested in the way kids and their parents were sharing those experiences together," said lead author Kiley Sobel, a UW doctoral student in Human Centered Design and Engineering. "People still don't really know how to build tech that works well for families, so when this game came out of the blue and really caught on, we wanted to look at what its ingredients for success were."

When the interdisciplinary UW research team first went to observe people playing "Pokémon GO" at a popular outdoor mall shortly after the game's release last July, they noticed a curious thing after the late Seattle summer sunset: Kids were still running around outside with their parents until as late as midnight.

"It was clearly way past everybody's bedtime," said senior author Jason Yip, assistant professor at the UW Information School. "We also noticed that the parents were playing Pokémon as much as the kids were, and we'd never seen that before with Minecraft or any Nintendo game. So we knew there was something going on here that was different."

In follow-up interviews with families who had begun playing "Pokémon GO" together, almost all parents had safety concerns about the game,

from children not paying attention to where they were going to interacting with strangers. To mitigate those concerns, many parents imposed limits or rules on the gameplay, such as only allowing older children to travel a certain distance from the home and requiring younger children to only play on a parent's device.

However, many parents reported net benefits from the overall experience, including noticing new details like artwork or pocket parks in their neighborhoods, teaching their kids how to navigate streets safely and having a shared interest with their children, particularly at ages when communication can become tricky. As one mom who played with her 8-year-old son told the interviewers:

"I think it's just helping us find a common thing we can do together as a mom and a boy, and that's really awesome for me ... As a boy coming home from school, they don't tell you what they ate or ... what the teachers said, but now he's telling me this stuff so it's a good way to be communicating."

Because the Pokémon franchise was first introduced in 1995, some parents had also grown up with the characters, which heightened their interest in playing the new location-based game. The simplicity of the game compared to others like Minecraft lowered the bar for participation, and parents' prior knowledge about and experience with Pokémon characters often led their kids to view them as valuable "experts" who could teach them.

"Pokémon has existed for over 20 years now. Watching so many kids play and engage with their parents through "Pokémon GO" was very different and exciting," said co-author and UW human centered design and engineering graduate student Arpita Bhattacharya, who grew up religiously watching the Pokémon TV series and movies and playing the card game with friends. "But it's also been popular among parents who

knew nothing about Pokémon."

The research team identified how "Pokémon GO" met six conditions that previous researchers have identified as leading to productive "joint media engagement" for families. Those include the ability to play and learn about the game together, motivation for multiple generations to engage, and features that make it easy to put the game away, such as the opportunity to put the phone away in a pocket until the next creature appears rather than constantly having to look at the screen.

In addition, "Pokémon GO" hinges on players going outside, walking and working in teams, making parents more likely to accept or promote gameplay or jointly participate with their children. That said, some of those same parents acknowledged that the "addictive" nature of "Pokémon GO" could lead to never-ending requests from their children to play.

By investigating the perspectives, values and challenges of parents who play "Pokémon GO" with their children, the team of UW information scientists, learning scientists and human-computer interaction researchers hope to shed new light on how to design technologies that invite families to engage in them together.

"That's a pretty difficult thing to tap into—how do you get different generations of people to want to play, even if it's for different reasons?" Sobel said. "These designers were able to capitalize on an older franchise that appealed to everyone from casual smartphone users to serious [game](#) players to children."

Provided by University of Washington

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