STRENGTHENING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH CO-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Parent-child relationships may be strengthened when parents and children play video games together. Literature is limited in addressing the impact of co-playing video games on parent-child relationships. Family systems theory, in particular, parental mediation through co-play, may provide insights into parent-child relationships. Parents who co-play in order to mediate video game content or child behaviors are selecting one of the less restrictive forms of mediation. Co-playing is likely to have an impact on parent-child relationships. Additionally, girls may benefit more than boys from co-play and fathers as co-players may have a greater impact on relationships than mothers.

KEYWORDS

Parent-child relationship; co-play; video games

1. INTRODUCTION

The family-centered video gaming movement can be traced to the 2006 Nintendo Wii (Chambers, 2012). The trend is believed to be brought about in part by parents' concerns about social disengagement of their video game playing children, the mobility of devices, and the near-constant access children have to video games making parental monitoring a challenge (Chambers, 2012; Jiow & Lim 2012). In an effort to address these concerns, some parents have taken to playing video games with their children (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Stockdale, & Day, 2011; Eklund & Bergmark, 2013; Nikken, Jansz, & Schouwstra, 2007; Shin & Huh 2011). There is limited literature on the impact of co-playing video games on the relationships between parents and children. A review of the literature is needed to identify gaps in the research and make recommendations for future study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, co-gaming is examined through the lens of the family systems theory, which is one of the most influential theories in family sciences (Charles, 2001). The theory states that an individual can be best understood with an understanding of the family system to which that individual belongs because "family systems theory is concerned with family dynamics, involving structures, roles, communication patterns, boundaries, and power relations" (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002, p. 329). The family systems theory was developed for use in clinical therapy, but has recently been integrated with nonclinical theories. Researchers studying gaming within families have used the family system theory as a theoretical framework (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012; Padilla-Walker et al., 2012).

2.1 Characteristics and Behaviors of Co-gamers

According to Nikken and colleagues (2007), parents who play video games with their children tend to believe that games can have a positive effect on children. Additionally, co-playing parents are usually younger and have more experience personally playing video games than those who don't co-play (Nikken et al., 2007).

In fact, 81% of surveyed parents who were active gamers reported playing video games with their children (Nielsen, 2008). However, the co-play of non-gaming parents was significantly lower. Only one third of adolescents sampled in a separate study reported having played with a parent (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). There was no significant difference between the amount that mothers and fathers play (Nielsen, 2008). Literature describes contradictory results comparing the co-play with sons and daughters. Two study showed the amount of co-play with sons and daughters did not vary (Coyne et al,, 2011; Padilla-Walker et al., 2012), whereas another study related that parents played more with sons (58%) than with daughters (37%) (Ipsos MORI, 2009). This could be due to differences between sample populations. The video games co-play generally lasts between 30 and 60 minutes per session at a frequency of a few times per week (Ipsos MORI, 2009). The games played by parents and children are primarily the "active technology/fitness games" genre followed by racing games, and then educational games (Ipsos MORI, 2009, p. 18).

The primary reasons that parents reported for co-playing games with children were that their children enjoyed it, their children asked them to play, they believed co-playing would improve the children's cognitive skills, they wanted to monitor the content of the games, and that co-playing allowed them to spend time with their children (Ipsos MORI, 2009; (Nielson, 2008). The primary reasons that children cited for playing with an adult family member were that it was more fun and that it allowed them to spend time with the adult (Ipsos MORI, 2009). Interestingly, among children who don't play with a parent, the children reported the top reason against co-playing was that it is less fun to play with the parent. Parents who don't co-play video games with their children state that they don't enjoy playing the games (Ipsos MORI, 2009).

2.2 Co-playing Video Games as Mediation

Parenting styles can impact the parent-child relationship. As such, the form of mediation used to manage video game playing can offer insight into the relationships between co-playing parents and children. Parents use a variety of methods to mediate video game playing with children including active mediation (i.e., discussing negative and positive game attributes and player behaviors), restrictive mediation (i.e., stopping gameplay), and parent-child co-play (Nikken & Jansz, 2003, 2006; Shin & Huh, 2011) to guard their children from the potentially harmful effects of video games. Some of the reported behaviors that were measured include frequency of video game play (Nikken et al., 2007; Shin & Huh, 2011), pro-social behaviors (Coyne et al., 2011; Shin & Huh, 2011), deceptive behaviors (Shin & Huh, 2011), and internalizing and aggression (Coyne et al., 2011). Parental mediation of decreased slightly as teenagers get older (Shin & Huh, 2011). While co-playing was perceived by some parents as an effective mediation strategy (Shin, Huh, 2011), it has been suggested that, due to parents' limited time, co-play is not used as frequently as more convenient, restrictive mediation (Nikken & Jansz, 2006).

2.3 Co-playing Video Games to Strengthen Relationships

A small number of studies have addressed the effect of co-playing video games on relationships. The gaming industry promoted co-gaming as a way to "foster family harmony" at a time when parents were concerned that video game playing was distancing children from the rest of the family (Chambers, 2012, p. 37). Both parent and child-reported connectedness was higher when parents co-played video games with their children, particularly in girls when playing age-appropriate games (Coyne et al., 2011). Padilla-Waler and colleagues (2012) suggested that the co-play represent a shared interest between parent and child, thus strengthening the relationship. Regular game co-playing between a father and child was found to improve family functioning, which would indicate stronger relationships (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012).

3. CONCLUSION

The limited literature addressing parent-child relationships through game co-playing indicates that co-playing may positively impact family relationships. Parents who co-play with their children are exhibiting one of the less restrictive forms of mediation, which may positively impact parent-child relationships. Girls who co-play may be affected more than boys (Coyne et al., 2011), and co-playing fathers may have a greater influence in improving relationships than co-playing mothers (Buswell et al., 2012).

Parents who play with their children should be aware of the potential for unintended consequences of co-playing games with violent or sexual content. Playing these games may result in increased interest in such content and more frequent playing of such video games with friends. There is a need for more research in this area to contribute to our understanding of this family experience.

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