photo: Martin Graca

Games and Gaming

Games are a natural part of childhood. Children take it as fun, relax, gaining new experiences or skills. In the past, children used to play classical games; they were throwing dice and moving stick figures. Nowadays it is different. They use mobile phones, tablets and computers to play games. The benefits of playing digital games include developing children's knowledge and skills. A child can choose any online game he or she wants. In some games, the player has to solve teasers and various tasks that develop memory and thinking. Task solving and decision making in games increases a child's autonomy, in group games they learn to work with others. Dynamic and action games develop hand eye coordination as well as fine motor skills and attention. When moving in online worlds, children learn better orientation in space. Last, but not least, games can be used as learning tools - in simulations and strategies children can try the functioning of economic principles or planning. In foreign-language games or in communicating with players from other countries, children develop vocabulary or language knowledge.

In addition to these benefits, computer games also have their own risks. One of the most serious is the risk to health. The computer games themselves may not cause any difficulties. However, if a child spends all of his or her free time with them, they can, as with any one-sided activity, leave traces or permanent consequences. The most common risk is being overweight or obese caused by insufficient movement. Sitting in front of the computer in an inappropriate position can damage the spine and lead to muscle weakness. Looking at the screen for a long time causes drying of the ocular mucosa, causes its irritation and consequently leads to headaches. Playing games at night disturbs the natural sleep rhythm. Players should not forget about regular drinking and eating.

Another risk that should not be taken lightly is inappropriate behaviour and violence in games. Some games played by children and adolescents include negative elements such as killing people or animals, alcohol and drug use, criminal behaviour and disrespect of laws, sexual violence and violence against women, racial prejudice, insults. Parents worry that such games will affect the behaviour of their children. They are afraid that their children who play violent games will behave violently in real life by reducing their sensitivity to violence and empathy with the victims. As the main argument they consider that games, in contrast with television, are not only passive. If child is to win, he or she has to behave aggressively towards others. Aggressive behaviour is not only watched by children but it is also acted out, even though in the virtual world. In games violent behaviour is appreciated and the reward for killing opponents is

progressing to a higher level. Researchers have not been able to confirm the direct link between behaviour in games and real-life behaviour yet, not all children who play aggressive games behave aggressively afterwards. Children need to not only learn to be good, but they also need to be able to defend themselves from being threatened. Aggressiveness and aggressive games have always been part of children's development and children have learned through games how to behave in different situations. Formerly, children played as soldiers and wrestled together more in reality, nowadays they apply it through the computer. Playing an aggressive game can also be a reaction to frustration and unpleasant experiences. The child will channel his or her anger and helplessness in the virtual world. In that case the game can be useful.

The last factor that should be mentioned is possible addiction to digital or computer games. We should not forget about that risk and it is important to parents to check the time which their child spends playing. Involvement in games may not always be negative. For children who have a problem with building relationships in reality, group games can be a stepping stone to boost their self-confidence and self-reliance. Relationships with a virtual community of players should be reasonably balanced by relationships in real life. As we have already mentioned, computer games will cease to be ordinary entertainment if it becomes the only way to spend free time. If the game is an activity for which children neglect all other activities in their lives, as well as relationships with relatives and friends, and is the only way to experience pleasant feelings then they can easily slip into addiction. It is confirmed that such addiction is a social problem and the cause of addiction is not only the game itself but also feelings of incompleteness, loneliness, sadness and suffering. Children escape into the world of games and fantasy where they experience joy, success and often admission to a group of teammates. The best protection against becoming addicted to computer games is the development of a child's real life relationships, the interest of parents in what is going on in the lives of their children and what is worrying them.

10 Golden Rules for Online Games (according to the Children on Network):
- **Agree on clear rules**. Agree with your child about clear rules and time to use their computer. Be sure to follow this agreement and consider the time your child spends on television or other media.
- **Choose games together.** Find the right games along with your kids and create your own opinion of their content.
- **Play together.** From time to time you should play electronic games with your child. Talk with him or her about good and bad games and let your child explain what games he or she plays.
- **Observe your child.** Observe what games your child plays and how often he or she plays them. Talk to your child when you notice a change in his or her behaviour. Keep an eye on who your child is playing with on the Internet.
- **Be informed.** Try to get information about good games as well as being wary of gambling.
- **Explore the security settings.** Computers, consoles and tablets must be set up in such a way that they would not harm the child. Beware that blocking software is installed on your computer. Installing such apps should be a parent's role. This also applies to locking the Internet payment option. It is not advisable for a child to use a laptop, desktop computer, smartphone or tablet for a long time without supervision.
- **Protect your personal information.** Before signing up for online games become informed about whether and how the information about your child will be processed. If games do not provide this information or such data as telephone number and address are not verified, the websites should not be trusted. Be careful that your child does not give any personal data to his or her gaming partner.
- **Pay attention on spending money.** Talk to your child about possible spending on games that may occur when you buy another part of the game or when a subscription is over. Younger children should not be able to buy additional equipment for their characters in the game.

- **Do not use games as means of education.** Do not use electronic games as a means of reward or punishment and do not abuse them to "babysittlize" your child. Games can become too important for them.
- **Take care about the change.** From the outset be careful that games are not the only hobby of your child. Take care of his or her mental and physical balance in relation to the computer and offer him or her attractive alternatives.

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photo: Martin Graca
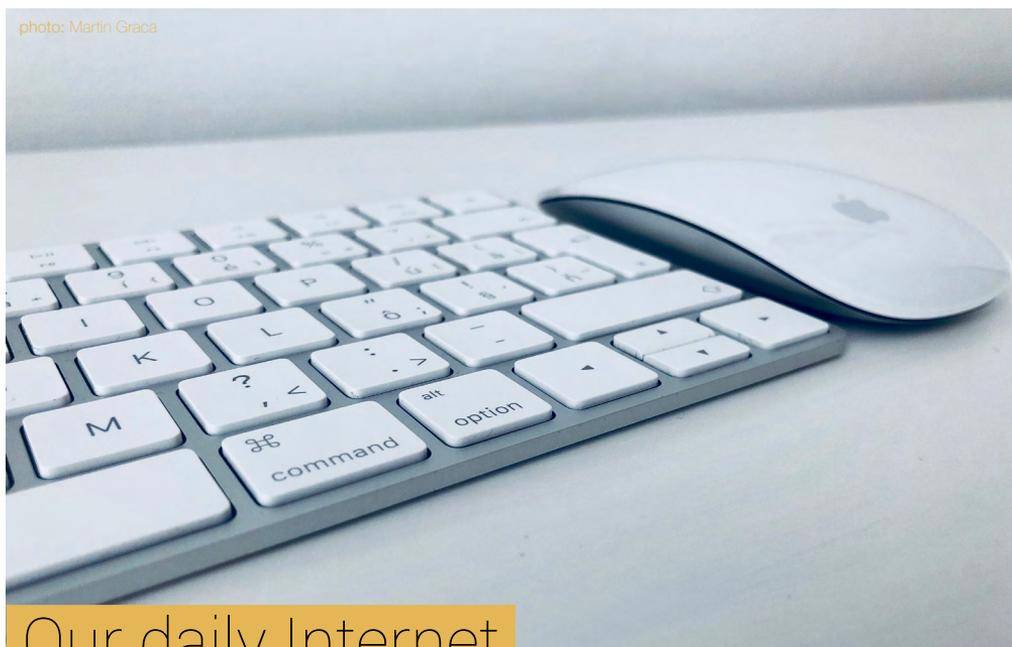
Our daily Internet

Damper or adviser? New technologies, in this case the Internet brings us faster and easier access to information in our lives. The Internet, beside playing games, communicating or building new relationships also serves as a learning aid or tool. In the family, media education is needed to guide our children even when working with the Internet.

There are several websites that offer various tutorials, information or even educational games in the Internet environment. We know, for example, the civic association eSlovensko, which implements the Zodpovedne.sk project supported by the European Commission within the Safer Internet program. The aim of Zodpovedne.sk is to raise awareness, to spread enlightenment about responsible Internet use as well as to prevent related crimes. Project also includes other projects: Pomoc.sk – a website you can contact when you need help or advice about using technology and Stopline.sk where illegal and inappropriate content on the Internet can be reported. Another is the Ovce.sk (Sheeplive) project. This project is also part of the Zodpovedne.sk project. Ovce.sk consists of two parts - an animated series for children and an international Internet portal. The aim of this project is to prevent and protect from the risks of the Internet, focusing in particular on children in pre-school and of younger school age. A series of animated fairytales show children in an exciting way the principles of how the online world works, the potential risks and pitfalls they may encounter as well as positive sites. The animated series is also designed for parents who can get to know the possible issues of a child-media relationship in this way.