

LearningWorks for Kids

Maximize the Benefits and Minimize the Risks of Children's Digital Play

by Mark Katz, PhD

THEY CAN TEXT THEIR THOUGHTS to a friend, yet be unable to write them on an essay exam. Or they may understand a slingshot's angles while playing Angry Birds, but struggle to understand angles in math class. Perhaps they focus for hours on a computer game, but are unable to focus in class. Imagine if the skills some children exhibit in the digital world also translated to the real world?

Psychologists and educational specialists at LearningWorks for Kids (LW4K) believe they can—with our help, that is. The help comes in the form of specific tools, strategies, and resources they've been refining, ones they believe can help children generalize their digital prowess to real-world learning, academic and social situations. Through

learningworksforkids.com, they've made them readily accessible.

The website has a number of other features as well, some designed for parents, some for teachers, and others for children.

- **For parents.** LW4K helps parents assess which educational technologies, computer games, apps and other digital devices are likely to best match up with their child's unique learning strengths and challenges. Parents can take an online assessment to help identify their child's specific areas of challenges. Prescriptively tailored digital technologies are suggested based upon assessment results.
- **For educators.** LW4K psychologists and learning specialists provide ideas for teachers on how to use digital technologies to improve academic skills, executive functions, and

motivation to learn and succeed at school. Teachers are also using LW4K's process of matching digital technologies to a student's unique learning needs as another way to help diverse learners and hard-to-reach children.

- **For children.** LW4K helps children understand the meaning of different thinking skills, like working memory, planning, organization, focus, self-control, self-awareness, flexibility, and time management (see the videos at learningworksforkids.com/kids-zone/what-is-working-memory/). Children learn how we use these skills throughout the day, how to spot these thinking skills when playing video games, and how to apply the same skills and strategies to real-world learning experiences, including experiences at school.

Summer and other vacation times

LW4K provides ideas on how to combine computer games and apps with great summertime adventures and physical activities to promote real-world learning. These enriched summer learning activities are especially important for children struggling in school who also have a history of falling further behind academically during the summer months.

A healthy and balanced play diet

Most people agree that a sensible and balanced nutritional diet is important to our physical, emotional, and social well-being. So too, say LW4K psychologists and educators, is a sensible and balanced play diet. And while digital play, when properly guided, can enhance a range of learning, academic and other skills, too much digital play robs children from learning experiences derived from other forms of play. With this in mind, LW4K developers created the LearningWorks for Kids Play Plate. Inspired by USDA's MyPlate, which offers guidelines for creating a healthy nutritional diet, the LW4K Kids Play Plate is designed to do the same for children's play time. Five categories of play are highlighted, along

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with guidelines on how to incorporate each into a child's life.

- **Digital Play:** Play that involves a range of digital technologies, such as games, websites, apps, mobile phones, iPods, tablets, writing programs, and others.
- **Social Play:** Play that involves friends, siblings, parents, teammates, or others we interact with during our day. We practice a lot of skills when engaged in social play, among them empathy, communication, perspective taking, and adapting flexibility to rules in a game.
- **Active Play:** Play that requires active physical movement. Researchers are finding that aerobic activity can enhance our physical and emotional well-being, and also help us better regulate our emotions and behavior.
- **Creative Play:** Play that involves innovation, exploration and imagination. Art, music and other forms of creative expression provide us opportunities to see ourselves and our world in new and enlightened ways.
- **Free Play:** Playing simply for the sake

of playing. There are no predetermined rules, only those children decide upon in the moment.

A healthy play diet is balanced. That healthy balance is lost if too much time is devoted to digital play. LW4K strongly believes that setting limits on digital play is imperative, especially for younger children. So too is knowing the nature of the digital content the child consumes, and the purpose it serves. LW4K encourages parents and other caregivers to watch for the following signs of "bad digital play habits":

- Children who use digital play as a way to isolate themselves from others, or who show signs of depression and social withdrawal.
- Children whose digital play results in less time engaging in physical activity, academics, or unstructured play.
- Digital technologies serving the function of "babysitter," resulting in children spending less face-to-face time with the parent and more time by themselves on a computer or other digital device.
- Digital play that functions as a distraction

or waste of time, not one that is part of a balanced play diet.

Visit learningworksforkids.com to learn more about LW4K's array of online services. Many of their online resources are available to visitors free of charge. Readers are encouraged to become an LW4K subscriber in order to take full advantage of the site's many other tools and guidebooks. Subscriptions can be purchased on a month-to-month or yearly basis. Randy Kulman, PhD, the founder of LW4K, will present an institute and breakout session at the CHADD conference in Washington, DC, in November 2013. 🗨

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