

SCREEN TIME

Beyond Minecraft: How to Get Your Child to Log Off

Minecraft offers kids with ADHD an opportunity to explore without rules or boundaries. And it rewards creativity. These are all attributes we can exploit to get our kids outside and exploring the real world more often. Here's how.

BY ADDITUDE EDITORS

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The Magnetic Pull of Video Games

Kids with ADHD love [video games](#). No, strike that – gaming is more than an infatuation; it's an obsession for many children. And a daily source of frustration for their parents, who fight about time limits, 5-minute warnings, and a healthy play diet that includes sports, reading, and other non-Minecrafty things.

Why do kids with ADHD like video games so much? Games deliver the clear, constant feedback their brains crave. They know what's right and what's wrong — instantly. Also, they are allowed to practice, doing the same thing time and time again until they get it right, and there's no one there to judge them. Because the failures are private, kids learn how to handle frustration and failure without public embarrassment.

Finally, video games are multimodal – they have sound or music, great visuals, actions – that together, provide the stimulation kids with ADHD crave.

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Why Kids Love Minecraft

Kids with ADHD are like Lewis and Clark. They like to break away and discover things on their own. In [Minecraft](#), there are no rules, specific quests, or goals. Kids can choose to build whatever they want in a safe environment. It offers a non-judgmental sense of achievement.

When a player makes a mistakes, it's not a big deal — which is huge for a child with ADHD who suffers low self-esteem and feels badly about his lack of success in school. If you make a mistake in Minecraft, you just correct it. This teaches flexibility.

Additionally, it connects kids with kids — online in the game and in real life as kids discuss the game. Players can learn from others, and improve at their own pace. Beginning play is easy, using the same building with blocks skills that kids learned with LEGOs.

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Skills Games Teach

Research shows that [video games](#) can improve problem-solving skills, working memory, leadership skills, and processing speed. They help kids build decision-making and planning skills, and improve focus and attention. More specifically...

- **Minecraft:** Improves focus and organizational skills
- **Super Mario 64:** Builds brain regions
- **Tetris:** Thicker cortex-brain efficiency
- **StarCraft:** Improves flexibility of thinking and executive function
- **Project EVO:** Improves focus and concentration (in early research)
- **LEGOs:** Organization and engineering skills

Video games are so immersive, kids might not exhibit ADHD symptoms while playing.

[Free Download: Brain-Building Video and Computer Games]

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Video Games are Powerful Tools

Though it often feels that way, video games are not our enemy; in fact, they can be our greatest ally in the struggle to teach our kids new skills. How? It's a matter of recognizing and using their strengths to your advantage:

1. The best behavior-management systems are designed to intervene immediately when a child acts out, at the point of performance. Video games do this. When you make a mistake, you know right away, then you go back and change it.
 2. Video games offer meaningful consequences (like losing a life, or earning points) for appropriate and inappropriate actions, just like behavioral interventions.
 3. [Video games](#) let kids with ADHD do things they would like to do in real life, but have trouble with because of symptoms – like socializing successfully. Many games let kids play with friends and converse while in the game.
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Transferring Skills to the Real World

A parent, teacher, clinician, or older sibling can encourage kids with ADHD to use the skills they are learning in [video games](#) out in the real world – to think about them, be reflective, and then connect them to life skills.

To begin, have conversations about the game that make the learning goal explicit – like how to use the planning skills from Minecraft to map out a school assignment. Develop a partnership with you child, then use clear activities to practice that skill in a functional way.

Just letting a child play the game won't help him translate the skill into a powerful learning opportunity. You have to go beyond the controller.

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Detect, Reflect, Connect

To effectively transfer skills, first help your child recognize what she is doing in the video game, then generalize and transfer that knowledge using three steps:

Detect: Help your child identify the skills he is using in the game.

Reflect: Help your child think about how those same skills might help him in the real world.

Connect: Show your child how to use those skills in the real world — how to apply them, and transfer game-based learning into real-world learning.

In the same way that playing soccer is something you do for fun, but it still builds cardiovascular fitness, Minecraft can build strengths by using certain cognitive skills.

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Detect and Reflect

Talk to your child about [Minecraft](#). Ask him to watch YouTube videos about Minecraft with you. Every once in a while, interject, “Hey, they're using really excellent flexible thinking skills here. You could use these skills when you get stuck on homework problems to find a creative solution.” These videos are fun and they're a great tool for kids. Watch livestreams of other kids using the game, and discuss how those skills play to the real world.

By talking to your child about Minecraft, you can figure out why he likes it and how you can parlay that into other interests. For example, some kids develop an interest in coding their own video games. Other kids get interested

in maps, architecture, history, engineering, or mining. This can translate into outdoor activities that incorporate that interest in the real world.

["One More Block!" Managing Your Child's Minecraft Obsession]

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Connect to Other Games

As you connect Minecraft attributes to non-Minecraft activities, keep these alternative games and activities in mind:

- **Roblox:** Similar to [Minecraft](#), this is a game in which you craft and build things. This is great for kids who are into the construction and building aspect of Minecraft. The main difference is that you are creating games that other people can play.
 - **The Blockheads:** A two-dimensional Minecraft. It is easier to get into, and has a Sims-like system for monitoring the health, well-being, and happiness of the people you are putting in the world — it hones the social side of the game.
 - **Terraria:** A two-dimensional crafting and building game, it is a cross between Minecraft and Super Mario Brothers because you are creating structures, but there are also boss battles, challenges, and a survival mode. This can be good if kids want a more guided experience than the open world of Minecraft.
 - **Toca Blocks:** A game from Toca Boca is a good fit for kids as young as 4 or 5. Kids make simple crafts and obstacle courses for characters to go over. It uses a lot of the same cognitive skills as Minecraft, but is simplified.
 - **Eden World Builder:** The most similar to Minecraft – it came out on iPad/iPhone before Minecraft was available there – this game also has an open world where you can create everything from scratch using blocks and mining for different materials. It has more creative elements, that let kids be a little more artistic, and color things differently.
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A Healthy Play Diet

It's a parent's job to help kids develop a healthy play diet. This means having a balance of different kinds of play. Digital play is only part of it. Healthy kids need to be outside, running around, being social, doing creative things, and being involved in unstructured play. Parents need to make that happen.

First, parents can model doing other activities like going outside and exercising.

When kids with ADHD engage in vigorous exercise, they increase a brain protein that helps them concentrate and learn.

To help kids get outside, make it an expectation at home that we're going to be involved in a variety of activities. If it's going to the gym, make it enticing by letting kids bring a friend. Or, you may need to invest money in a gymnastics class, or putting up a basketball hoop.

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Digital Context

A healthy play diet does include some digital play, and some screen time. The parent's role is to determine what is appropriate, and to have conversations about social media and bullying at the outset.

Save technology for times when you need it. Set limits and have strategies to make them enforceable, while still being flexible.

Use scheduling – give kids a set amount of time they can play, like an hour. This can vary with age. The older kids are, the more digital time they can have to connect with peers with less parental supervision. Curate the games that kids play, and allow them to play certain games you deem educational for as long as they'd like. Not all games and TV shows are equally bad or good.

How to Enforce Strict Limits

Some kids struggle to abide by household rules about video games, so restrictions are necessary. Create clear rules and structured limitations on game play. This may mean shutting off the internet at certain times, and putting the router in your room. You may need to use parental controls on cell phones and tablets, like the Screen Time app.

Remind an obstinate child that parents own the technology, and kids need permission to use it. Your child will be frustrated the first couple days, but stick to your schedule of allowed game play and don't bargain or dole out extra time. Over time, it will become clear that parents are in control, and the arguments will die down.

Video Games in Therapy

Clinicians can use Minecraft and other video games to help build skills – and enhance the effectiveness of psychotherapy. For example, playing Minecraft can help a kid who has problems with cognitive flexibility. Clinicians observe the child playing the game, then talk with him about how he had to be flexible, and get him to transfer that game-based skill into a real-world skill.

You can also use the game as a teaching tool, and recognize the skills being used in each game, then apply that in conversation and give the child homework.

Try saying, “When you play Minecraft, I want you to build a couple of these things and we’ll talk about it next time you come in.” So we’re giving children an assignment that involves playing video games, but it really involves thinking about the [executive skills](#) they use.

[\[How Can I Break My Child’s Minecraft Obsession?\]](#)