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Director of NMSU's Learning Games Lab offers parents tips on holiday shopping (12:50 p.m.)

Sun-News report
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The holidays are around the corner and most parents have already begun shopping or are preparing to start. Video games are certain to be on your children's lists, which may cause a problem for parents who often are unaware of what type of game they are giving their kids.

New Mexico State University has been aware of the advancements in gaming technology, creating the Learning Games Lab in 2006. The lab was designed to research and test educational computer and console-based games. Barbara Chamberlin, associate professor and extension instructional design and educational media specialist, serves as the current project director of the Learning Games Lab and has compiled a list of tips to help parents avoid headaches and confusion while shopping.

Chamberlin recommended parents use the Educational Software Review Board ratings printed on every game package as a guide. Many of the games your kids may hear about and request could be inappropriate for their age. Based on violence, language and mature activities or themes, the ESRB has a consistent rating system for every game sold.

A game will be rated for "Early Childhood," "Everyone," "Everyone Ages 10 and Older," "Teen," "Mature," and "Adult." Titles rated "Mature" may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language, and should be purchased only for gamers 17 and older. Be sure to check the icon on the game package; many of the games your child may hear about and ask for are rated "mature"



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Eric Leung and Jason Jacobs take turns playing a game on the Nintendo Wii in the... (Courtesy photo)

and are likely inappropriate for young teens. More information about these ratings can be found at esrb.org Chamberlin said there are primarily two types of games to play: passive and active. Passive games involve the gamer playing the game solely with a controller, while active games require the gamer to stand, jump or move quickly and use controllers with their feet or hands.

She suggested replacing some passive screen time with active screen time. For example, instead of using only their thumbs while relaxing on a couch, your gamer can move jump and swing through a series of "active games" or "exergames". Though active games have been around for some time, Nintendo's Wii introduced them to many homes.

Games like "Dance, Dance Revolution," in which players dance on a physical mat while following music and stepping to the beat in the game, can burn considerable calories and are available for most game consoles,

including the older PlayStation II. Nintendo's Fit and Balance Board, used with the Wii console, facilitates games requiring balance and stability, including yoga and pilates.

Active games include games that challenge players with scores and fun activities, as well as more interactive fitness programs. Ask a store clerk for some suggestions, or encourage your child to do their own research and add one or two of these games to their wish lists.

Chamberlin also advised doing some research on educational games before parents buy them because educational games aren't easy to find, and they usually aren't highlighted at the front of the store with their better-selling cousins. However, several quality titles exist. Rather than look for grade-specific titles, browse the shelves for titles that include language, math and science development.

"Parents can make a model for their children," Chamberlin said. "By including some educational titles in their library, children learn that education isn't something that just takes place in the classroom."

Ask your child what types of educational games are interesting, and you may find an entire section of a game store or online product search that your children have yet to explore.

Chamberlin explained that parents should take advantage of the changes occurring within the gaming world and use

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video games to plan a family night.

"Gaming isn't something that is just done by kids by themselves," Chamberlin said. "It has changed into something parents and families can do together."

One of the benefits to systems with nontraditional interfaces is games where you don't have to use only your thumbs or a joystick is that families tend to play together. Grandma, your teenager and your 6-year-old can all easily use the Wii controller with the Nintendo Wii to bowl. Get involved in the gaming life of your children, and ask them to show you how to play. Games are fun, even for adults.

Chamberlin advised parents to look for recommendations or ask for help from store clerks because clerks know games, often because they are young adults who play them. Let them know the ages of the children in your family and your goals; such as games that the family can play together, educational titles or exergames.

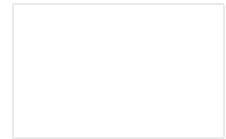
The Web site commonsensemedia.org and others are devoted to helping families identify age appropriate and beneficial games. Search "educational game recommendations" in any search engine to find additional blogs and online resources to help your search. By taking an active role in choosing and evaluating the games your family plays, you can find significant benefit in how gaming free time impacts your family.

Chamberlin advises parents to be informed on gaming because they could soon be buying their own games.

"Games are changing and becoming more interactive," Chamberlin said. "Developers used to target a demographic, male ages 13 to 24, but now they are making games for middle-aged housewives, senior citizens and toddlers. There is no digital divide with the gaming industry; it cuts across gender, age and even socioeconomic status."

For information, contact Chamberlin at (575) 646-2848 or visit learninggameslab.org.

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