

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD CO-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study explores the pedagogical potential of joint video game playing between parents and children as a form of family leisure time. While previous research has largely focused on the risks associated with excessive gaming, this study shifts the lens to its formative, relational, and preventive aspects. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first, a quantitative survey ($N = 178$) identified families in which joint gaming was frequent. In the second, 12 parent-child dyads ($N = 24$) were selected for qualitative semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five key themes: motivation for joint play, emotional experiences, types and styles of games, perceived impact on the parent-child relationship, and boundaries and rules. Children primarily engaged in gaming for fun and enjoyment, while parents viewed it as a means of connecting with their child's interests and fostering a stronger relationship. Cooperative and competitive games emerged as the most pedagogically valuable, offering opportunities for emotional insight, communication, and behavioural regulation. Moreover, the act of setting boundaries around gaming time proved to be an important site of educational influence. The study is grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, highlighting how parental involvement in digital leisure spaces can support child development. These findings contribute to media and leisure pedagogy by identifying joint video gaming as a meaningful and structured family activity with long-term educational and relational benefits.

KEY WORDS

media pedagogy, family time, leisure time, gaming, leisure pedagogy

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become an integral part of contemporary childhood. This is evident in children's daily activities in the virtual world through various digital devices, including mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and gaming consoles. In addition to children, the virtual world has also become a part of adults' everyday lives. Consequently, the conditions of parenting within the family are changing. While the virtual world may pose certain risks, it also presents new educational and affirming opportunities.

The foundation of upbringing within the family context is manifested in the parent-child relationship, which permeates everyday family, work, and school obligations. An important space for parental educational influence beyond the abovementioned contexts is family leisure time. This refers to the time spent in joint activities, whether purposeful or spontaneous [1]. Joint leisure time can vary in form and structure – it can be structured by parents or unstructured, with family activities left to spontaneous occurrences [2].

Considering the increasing involvement in separate virtual activities, there is a potential opportunity for shared leisure time in the virtual world between parents and children. The importance and educational potential of such shared virtual activities can be explained through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [3]. Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of parental guidance in the context of a child's learning and interaction within their environment. Given that the virtual world may pose developmental risks, parental guidance becomes both necessary and desirable, with an emphasis on quality educational engagement that fosters long-term positive outcomes.

Within this framework, three types of joint video game playing can be differentiated:

- 1) parent-directed: where the parent is an experienced gamer and takes on a clear parental role, implying high pedagogical potential [4, 5];
- 2) parent-child negotiated: where parent and child engage as equals or peers, which may indicate a dual educational-formative aspect of joint gaming [4];
- 3) child-directed: where the child is an experienced gamer and teaches the parent how to play video games [4, 5].

Although the parent may lack gaming experience in the child-directed scenario, their expressed interest in the child's interests fosters a positive educational influence. It supports long-term parent-child relationship development.

All of the above forms of shared gaming represent both educationally affirming and potentially preventive tools. Within scientific discourse, the effects of video game play on children vary greatly depending on the context. Therefore, further research is needed to define key determinants of the positive educational aspects of video game playing in the family context.

So far, studies on video games have mainly focused on identifying risk behaviours associated with excessive gaming or the content-related risks of video games. Frequent and prolonged gaming has been linked to mental health difficulties, including depression, social anxiety, and loneliness among players [6, 7].

There are also gender differences in gaming behaviours. While girls also participate in virtual worlds – primarily through social media – boys are significantly more likely to engage in video gaming. The problematic side of video games is often associated with gambling behaviour among boys, highlighting a potential link between gaming and gambling tendencies [8, 9].

Previous research has primarily examined individual child gaming or gaming with peers, with a research focus on adverse outcomes. From the leisure-time perspective, the lack of structure in video game play can have long-term negative consequences for children and adolescents.

This aligns with findings in the pedagogy of leisure, which stress that unstructured leisure time may carry negative developmental implications [2].

On the other hand, when parents actively participate in their child's leisure time, a new dimension is created – a space for educational influence where the quality of the relationship becomes more important than the content of the activity. Thus, in educational terms, the content of leisure time becomes secondary to the relational dynamic it facilitates.

Besides educational impact, joint video game playing may also positively influence learning through parental guidance, modelling, instruction, and communication [4]. In this context, communication stands out as a key feature – it can develop during game play and, importantly, carry over into broader family interactions.

Given the inherently entertaining nature of video games, setting boundaries within gameplay is critically important from an educational perspective – and this is where parental involvement is essential. By setting limits on screen time or involvement in gaming, even when not playing themselves, parents can directly contribute to healthy developmental boundaries, which are essential for effective parenting [10].

In conclusion, joint video game playing can serve as a valuable tool for educational, affirming, and preventive purposes if supported by sound pedagogical strategies. Croatian scientific literature currently lacks sufficient research on the connection between parenting and virtual leisure, specifically in the context of parent-child joint video game playing.

Therefore, this study aimed to gain insight into both parents and children's subjective perceptions of joint video game playing – in order to identify children's needs and views, as well as the potential educational actions parents may take within the shared gaming process.

To the research aim and the qualitative nature of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ₁: How do parents and children perceive joint video game playing?

RQ₂: In what ways does joint video game playing affect family communication and relationships?

RQ₃: How do parents set boundaries related to video gaming, and how do children perceive those boundaries?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

In line with the research aim, the first phase of the study focused on sample collection in the two largest Croatian cities, Zagreb and Split, to ensure demographic and cultural consistency. Parents were contacted through school channels with an invitation to participate in the study by completing a Google Form. Those who agreed to participate completed a questionnaire that included socio-demographic information about their child and responded to a statement regarding the frequency of joint video game playing, rated on a three-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). At the end of the questionnaire, parents were given the option to provide their contact information for potential inclusion in the study's second phase.

To obtain a valid and in-depth insight into joint video game playing, only those parents who had indicated frequent co-play with their child were contacted for the second phase of the research. Out of a total of 237 contacted parents, 178 completed the questionnaire, and 31 indicated frequent joint video game playing with their child. These individuals were invited to participate in the qualitative phase of the study. As the final sample was determined based on the criterion of code saturation, the qualitative phase ultimately included 12 parents.

The sample consisted of 12 parent-child dyads ($N = 24$), with the average age of parents being 37,25 years (range 27-46) and the average age of children being 10,08 years (range 7-13). The majority of dyads consisted of fathers and sons, while only one family involved joint video game playing between a mother and daughter. This was also the sole response from the quantitative phase that reflected the inclusion of either mothers or girls in video game play. A summary of the qualitative sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sampling matrix of qualitative participants ($N = 12$).

City	Parent Code	Parent Gender	Parent Age	Child Code	Child Gender	Child Age
Zagreb	P1	M	38	C1	M	10
Zagreb	P2	M	41	C2	M	12
Zagreb	P3	M	35	C3	M	9
Zagreb	P4	M	29	C4	M	7
Zagreb	P5	M	46	C5	M	13
Zagreb	P6	M	33	C6	M	11
Split	P7	M	37	C7	M	8
Split	P8	M	42	C8	M	10
Split	P9	M	36	C9	M	9
Split	P10	M	27	C10	M	7
Split	P11	M	44	C11	M	12
Split	P12	F	39	C12	F	13

Experimental Procedure and Analytic Plan

The research was conducted in three phases: 1) contacting parents – quantitative questionnaire; 2) filtering responses and administering a qualitative questionnaire; and 3) data processing – coding and thematic analysis. Following the initial quantitative phase, which identified parents who play video games with their children, the qualitative phase commenced with semi-structured interviews conducted with the parents and their children. Prior to participation in the study, both parents and children were required to sign informed consent forms. They were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and would be used solely for scientific research purposes. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Interviews were conducted separately with parents first, followed by their children. Given that the study involved minors, ethical approval was obtained in advance from the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Croatia (Approval number: 641-01/24-03/22). With informed consent granted, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and subsequently subjected to thematic analysis. During the interviews, participants were asked about the nature of their video game playing, how their gaming sessions typically unfold, the types of games they play, their responses to negative emotions during gameplay, differing perspectives on the setting of boundaries, and future agreements related to video game playing. The only question that differed between parents and children concerned their perception of boundary setting, which was tailored to their respective roles.

The research was concluded upon reaching code saturation, i.e., the point at which no new relevant information emerged from additional interviews [11]. Following the completion of all interviews, the researchers independently conducted an explanatory phase of data familiarization [12]. Coding was performed manually using an open coding approach. Afterwards, researchers discussed and aligned their codes through dialogue following the completion of individual coding [13]. The entire coding and thematic analysis process was conducted by established qualitative research guidelines [14].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with the research objectives and questions, five themes were identified, each accompanied by corresponding codes: motivation for joint play, emotions, types and styles of games, perceived impact on the parent-child relationship, and boundaries and rules. In the subsequent analysis, responses from both parents and children were presented and interpreted within the context of their respective themes and codes. To ensure the anonymity of participants, responses were labeled with the letters P (parent) and C (child). To reflect the diversity of responses, numerical identifiers and basic socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were also included.

Table 2. Themes and codes.

THEMES	CODES
Motivation for Joint Play	Parental Reasons Children's Reasons
Emotions	Positive Emotions Negative Emotions
Types and Styles of Video Games	Cooperative Games Creative Games Competitive Games
Perceived Impact on Parent-Child Relationship	Parental Perception Child's Perception
Boundaries and Rules	Parental Strategies Children's Experiences of Boundaries

1ST THEME – MOTIVATION FOR JOINT PLAY

The first theme encompasses participant responses related to their motivations for playing video games together. These responses are categorised into two codes, reflecting the perspectives of both the parent and the child.

Children predominantly reported that their motivation stems from the positive aspects of spending time together, such as laughter and enjoyment:

“...because then we spend more time together and laugh.” (C/3)

“Then we have more time for each other, and with my mom, we always laugh.” (C/12)

Parental motivations, on the other hand, differed. Rather than focusing on the content of the game itself, parents emphasized their desire to connect with their children:

“I play video games because it matters to my child. It is his world, and I want to get to know it.” (P/3)

“Sometimes we do not have time for each other, and since she likes to play video games, this is how I get closer to her. Even though I do not know much about video games ...” (P/12)

The children's reasons for playing video games, as expressed in the interviews, align with existing pedagogical literature, which suggests that children primarily engage in gaming for enjoyment and personal satisfaction [15]. The children's responses indicate that their motivation is rooted in personal pleasure and fun; however, in this context, it is also associated with involving the parents in their virtual and leisure-time activities.

In contrast, the parents' responses reveal that video game play within the context of leisure time is largely child-centred. This implies that the child assumes the role of an "expert", effectively guiding the parent through the activity they enjoy – namely, video games [10]. These responses suggest that the underlying motivations are fundamentally different: the parent's goal is to understand their child better and participate in their world, with limited intrinsic motivation for consuming virtual content, whereas the child's focus lies in the enjoyment of the content itself and the inclusion of the parent in that experience.

This dynamic opens a space for educational influence by the parent within the child's virtual leisure time. It also presents an opportunity to mitigate the potential development of behaviour-related problems associated with unstructured virtual leisure activities. By participating – regardless of the initial motivation – the parent helps provide structure to the child's leisure time, which in turn offers a degree of developmental protection in terms of organizing and managing free time [2, 16].

2ND THEME – EMOTIONS

The second theme relates to the emotions experienced by children and parents during joint video game play. As with the previous theme, two codes are associated with this category: positive emotions and negative emotions. Both parents and children reported that not all experiences during joint gaming sessions are positive. Specifically, negative emotions also emerge. Most reports of negative emotions came either directly from children or were observed by parents in their children:

"He gets angry when he loses." (P/7)

"I do not like when the game is interrupted ... it is just ... somehow ... it drives me crazy." (C/5)

On the other hand, positive emotions were connected to achieving shared goals within the games:

"When we win against someone together, I feel happy." (C/9)

"I see him smiling when we are in a game together. Sometimes we complete tasks together, and I can see that this gives him the greatest sense of fulfilment." (P/11)

The negative emotions reported by children and their parents can be associated with the concept of "gamer rage", which describes the emotional responses of frustration and anger that children may express, both verbally and physically, when they experience failure or are unable to surpass an opponent in a game [17]. These emotional reactions are often linked to feelings of frustration and a perceived lack of control or success, manifesting in observable behavioural changes.

Although these emotions are negative and may cause temporary discomfort in the parent-child interaction, from a pedagogical perspective, they may carry long-term positive value. Such experiences provide parents with insights into their child's capacity for emotional self-regulation. This, in turn, offers valuable indicators for future educational efforts and areas for joint family development that contribute to the child's overall emotional growth and well-being.

The responses related to positive emotions align with existing research, which suggests that video game play can foster a sense of belonging among children [15]. In this context, the sense of belonging is particularly valuable because it develops about a family member – the parent. In the long term, the development of a sense of belonging is considered a protective factor against the emergence of behavioural problems [18].

3RD THEME – TYPES AND STYLES OF VIDEO GAMES

Based on participant responses, three types of video games emerged as most commonly present in family-based joint play during leisure time: cooperative, creative, and competitive games. Each of these types of games carries the potential for positive educational outcomes but also presents possible pedagogical challenges.

Cooperative games provide opportunities for collaboration and offer parents insight into their child's willingness to share, delegate tasks, and cooperate in general. Parents also reported that this type of gameplay allows them to observe aspects of their child's personality and character traits, which serve as important feedback for future educational interactions both within and outside the family context:

“We enjoy games where we solve tasks together, like adventure games. He opens up more easily then, and I get a better sense of his character.” (P/10)

“We cooperate – usually it is something like Roblox. At first, he did not want to share anything. He wanted everything for himself, and that showed me we needed to work on it.” (P/3)

In contrast, creative games are not as directly pedagogically oriented, but they offer educational value by fostering knowledge acquisition and the development of various skills:

“In Roblox, we can do whatever we want. We both come up with ideas and build things. It makes me feel free somehow.” (C/12)

“In Minecraft, we build materials and arrange them together. It is interesting because I see how he behaves in a different context.” (P/4)

Participants, particularly parents, noted that competitive video games serve as a valuable tool for observing how children manage situations they find unfavourable, such as losing. These observations provide parents with insight into their child's emotional regulation and can inform future parenting strategies:

“We play FIFA because I can see how he reacts when he loses.” (P/7)

“We usually play racing games. Sometimes I let him win, but other times I beat him just to see how he handles it.” (P/11)

The responses indicate that the most pronounced educational and formative potential lies within cooperative and competitive games. Parents view these games not only as pedagogical tools but also as indicators of a child's emotional regulation and personality traits. These findings are consistent with the pedagogical literature on children's play, which emphasises that cooperative and competitive games are important for the development of prosocial behaviour and broader social functioning [19]. Previous research in this area has generally focused on traditional, non-digital games. However, the present findings suggest that similar developmental and educational benefits can also be observed in video games despite differences in format. In contrast, creative games are more aligned with the educational domain of child development. While they offer fewer opportunities for observing character traits, they encourage the development of creativity, vision, and idea generation, particularly when supported by parental involvement. Scientific studies examining the relationship between digital tools and the promotion of creativity in children have shown that entertainment content with an educational component can support creative development [20]. The findings of this study can be viewed within that context. Specifically, creative video games hold value in fostering skills related to creativity and innovation.

In summary, the content of video games can have added pedagogical value – cooperative and competitive games support educational and formative objectives. In contrast, creative games

contribute to cognitive development by promoting creativity. A promising direction for future research lies in the quantitative identification of specific skills developed through different types of video game content.

4TH THEME – PERCEIVED IMPACT ON PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Subjective perceptions of joint video game playing differ depending on the role of the participant—that is, whether the respondent is a parent or a child. Despite these differences in perspective, the overall perceptions of joint video game play are positive. Participants reported that their relationships within the broader family context tend to become more relaxed and that a greater level of mutual trust is developed.

Parental perceptions are framed through the lens of efforts to strengthen the parent-child relationship:

“I’ve noticed that he opens up more after we play. He’s become more talkative and relaxed.” (P/6)

“It feels like we’re closer in our relationship. He listens to me more and confides in me. It’s like he trusts me more.” (P/10)

Children, on the other hand, reported that it becomes easier for them to communicate with their parents about personal issues or problems they are facing:

“When we play, it’s easier for me to tell him if something’s bothering me.” (C/3)

“I like playing with my dad because he listens to me then, and I tell him if I did something wrong at school.” (C/9)

The responses from both parental and child perspectives suggest that joint video game playing contributes to improved communication, which in turn fosters greater trust and overall strengthens the parent-child relationship [21]. These findings indicate that the content around which children and parents gather can serve as a meaningful tool for enhancing family relationships. Although video games may carry potential developmental risks, when structured and supervised, they can be effectively used as a valuable medium for connecting with the child – thus supporting a long-term educational and formative function. The quality of the parent-child relationship, along with the emotional bond the child forms with the parent, is also crucial for the child’s long-term socio-emotional development [22]. This further reinforces the pedagogical potential of video games and underscores the educational significance of researching virtual leisure time in the context of parenting, family dynamics, and child development.

5TH THEME – BOUNDARIES AND RULES

The final theme focuses on the crucial pedagogical component of setting boundaries. Participant responses revealed differing parental strategies for establishing limits, as well as children’s experiences of those boundaries during joint video game play. Parental strategies were most commonly reflected in the form of time-based restrictions:

“We have an agreement – one hour of playtime if all tasks are completed. When I say it out loud, it sounds like blackmail, but it works.” (P/12)

“Before we start, I agree with him on how long we will play. There is no other way. We tried without limitations, and it did not work.” (P/1)

Children, on the other hand, reported that, in addition to time limitations, they are sometimes required to complete specific tasks prior to playing video games:

“I know I can play when I finish my homework, and I am fine with that. Sometimes I do not feel like it, but still ...” (C/5)

“I help my mom with little things, and then we play. It is not hard for me, so I just do it to get to the game.” (C/8)

From both parent and child responses, two key forms of pedagogical engagement within shared leisure time can be identified: time restriction and task completion as a prerequisite. Both approaches are initiated by parents, highlighting the fact that joint video game play can be appealing to children and thus becomes a valuable educational tool in the context of family life. This can be viewed through the lens of ZPD [3], which emphasizes the importance of parental guidance in shaping a child’s development. In this context, the parent-child relationship and the time spent together are pedagogically structured, with the potential for long-term developmental benefits for both the child and their relationship. Research on video games and family dynamics in the context of virtual leisure time suggests that video games can be effective educational tools for teaching children how to respect and internalize boundaries [23, 24]. This further supports the pedagogical significance of leisure time and the virtual environment in the upbringing of children.

All themes identified in this study demonstrate that virtual leisure time provides a valuable space for pedagogical engagement and warrants greater attention within pedagogical research, which is currently lacking in studies focused on educational influence within the leisure domain. Although this study contributes to expanding the literature in this field, certain limitations should be acknowledged. These include the predominance of male participants in the sample and the qualitative nature of the study. Although a quantitative component was included, it did not significantly contribute to the overall analysis. Future research could benefit from a more in-depth quantitative approach.

CONCLUSION

The integration of multiple pedagogical dimensions has revealed that leisure-time pedagogy, family pedagogy, and media pedagogy are interrelated and constitute key components of the contemporary educational framework. The increasing number of hours children spend in virtual environments – particularly playing video games – highlights the importance of exploring this phenomenon from a pedagogical perspective in both developmental and preventive contexts. This study has produced an important qualitative framework, demonstrating that shared leisure time involving video game play holds significant educational potential. The findings may serve as a foundation for future preventive initiatives in schools and families, as well as a model for appropriate pedagogical practices within modern family life. Participants indicated that, depending on the content and type of game, video games can substantially influence children not only in terms of upbringing but also in the development of specific skills. As a form of family leisure time, video games represent a valuable resource for strengthening the parent-child relationship, with the potential for long-term positive outcomes for the child. The quality of this relationship is fundamental to family life, and video games may contribute meaningfully as a pedagogical and educational tool with high developmental value. Although this study provides important insights, it also opens pathways for future research using more advanced methods, including real-time tracking of family gaming habits and consideration of variables such as game quantity and parental styles. Future pedagogical research could benefit from examining a broader range of video game types and their potential contributions to family relationships. Given the predominance of male participants (both children and fathers) in the current sample, future studies should aim to identify and analyse media usage patterns among girls to investigate the educational impact of virtual spaces on female participants. This would contribute to building a comprehensive pedagogical framework for understanding the role of virtual leisure – particularly within the family context – from both a practical and research-based perspective.

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