Game On

There are a lot of fun things about video games: the chance to explore a new world, to complete with other players, to be part of a story or part of a team. But there are also things that the video game makers do to make sure you keep coming back.

Understanding these things is an important part of helping you make sure that video games and other screen activities are part of a balanced life.

Achievement: One of the reasons we play games is because it's fun to get better at something. It makes us feel good just to know we're better at the game than we used to be, but a lot of games also give us little reminders that we've gotten better: you may get a badge, your name on a leaderboard, new items or options or even whole new areas of the game to play in. It can be hard to stop playing when you know you're close to getting one of these.

Random rewards: Most games also give you some rewards *randomly*, so that you never know what's going to be in the next treasure chest or around the next corner. These are actually a *more* powerful way of getting you to keep playing than achievements, because *any* time playing the game is a chance to get one.

Duty: If you're playing a multi-player game, chances are you're working with other people to get things done. When you feel like people are counting on you, it may seem like you're letting them down if you're not playing with them.

Fantasy: For a lot of people, the most important part of playing games is the feeling like you're in another world. These worlds are fun to explore, and it also feels good to be able to do things that we can't do in the real world. For some people games may feel like an *escape* from things in their lives they don't like. That's not a bad thing, unless it starts making you spend so much time gaming that it makes your life worse.

Penalties for quitting: In most games, quitting completely – or even for a while – can mean giving up everything that you've won and earned in the game. Even if a game stops being fun, the idea of giving all of that up can be enough to keep us from quitting.

Mindful Gaming

Video games and other screen activities can be a lot of fun, and an important part of our lives. But we need to make sure that *we're* in control of what we're doing and when we're doing it.

Here are some tips and techniques for making sure that you're using screens in a **mindful** way. They can help you balance your screen time with other parts of your life and also help you relax if the idea of being away from your screens is stressing you out.

Make a plan. Decide ahead of time when you're going to be gaming or doing other screen activities. Don't worry too much about how much time you're spending: just making the plan will mean you do it less. *If gaming or other screens are taking up too much of your time, this will show you pretty quickly. How does game time or screen time stack up against time you spend doing other things?*

Keep screens in one place. Part of making a plan is to treat your screen time as a "date." If you can, have just one place in your house where you play games or do other screen stuff. No matter what, *keep games and other screen devices – especially portable ones – out of your bedroom.*

Take a tech break. Instead of doing everything at once, set yourself times of day when you use screens and times when you don't. When you aren't using them, put your screen devices out of reach and out of earshot (so you can't hear them ringing, buzzing or anything else.) *If screens are stressing you out, knowing that you have tech time coming up may make it easier to get through the no-tech time.*

Get active. Screens deliver so much stimulation to our eyes and ears; sometimes we forget that our bodies need something to do too! Make sure to take to walk around, dance, draw, etc. If you can, get outside or do something that stimulates your other senses like cooking. *If you feel upset or stressed when you stop gaming, doing something active can help you get over it.*

Get creative. If you're really into the world of the game, you can explore it it in ways that are just as fun and creative too:

- draw characters and scenes from the game
- write stories about the game (imagine meeting your game characters, or having them meet characters from other games, shows or videos you like)
- make a board game or a playground version of your game (if there's anything like shooting or fighting in your game, change it to tagging in your playground version)
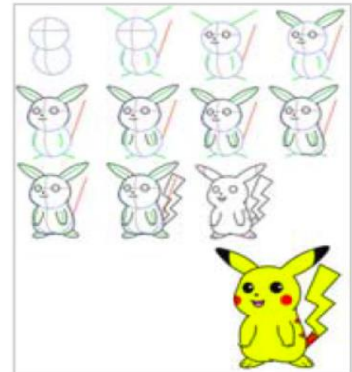
Relax. Games can stress you out because your brain doesn't totally "know" that they're not real. Take regular breaks to do relaxing breathing exercises (start by taking a deep breath with your nose and letting it out with your mouth: your parents or teacher can help you find more advanced exercises) or tensing and then relaxing your muscles one-by-one.

If you feel stressed when you stop playing, these can help too.

End on a high note. It feels great when you earn a badge, get a new power or unlock a new level of a game. That feeling can make you want to keep playing. Instead, make a habit of calling it quits after each major achievement.

Turn devices all the way off. When you're not using your screen device, don't just let it sleep, put it away or set it to buzz: when it's off, turn it all the way off. *If that's hard for you, you may have to give your device to someone else to hang on to when you're not using it.*