Parents' MINECRAFT CHEAT SHEET

If you're completely baffled by your child's obsession and preoccupation with Minecraft, rest assured you're not alone. Trying to figure out exactly *why* Minecraft is so appealing has left many parents bewildered and frustrated.

This quick "Parents' Minecraft Cheat Sheet" is designed to help you make sense of this digital block world in which children want to spend time (lots of time in fact) playing. Print it out and keep it handy so you can access the information when your child's engrossed in the game, or when you're frustrated that they just won't switch it off.

Minecraft 101: What's All the Fuss About?

Minecraft is a virtual world, often referred to as "digital Lego". Players harvest resources such as wood, gold, iron ore and use these to build virtual objects such as houses, caves and castles. These virtual objects are made from textured 3D cubes (blocks). In addition, there are bad characters to watch out for and defeat. Minecraft can be played individually or collaboratively with others in real time. It's basically a digital canvas that offers complete freedom for children to explore and create. It's akin to having an infinite box of blocks.

What's interesting to note is that the graphics are very low-tech in comparison to many of the video games and websites that are typically played by children. The game was not initially designed for children, but it's been rapidly embraced by children throughout the world, with over 20 million copies of the game sold.

Minecraft is not a "video game", in the strictest of terms, as there are no definitive rules, levels or winners (or losers). And this feature is certainly part of the appeal of Minecraft.

Minecraft's more like a digital toy than a video game. The open-ended design means that each child's experience in Minecraft is unique and personalised. These are further reasons as to Minecraft has a very broad appeal.

Minecraft Addiction: Are they "Addicted" or "Engaged"?

Many parents have experienced first-hand how "captivating" Minecraft is for children. So first, let's look at whether they really are *addicted* or whether it's something else.

Are they really "addicted" or are the simply "engaged"?

Strictly speaking, only a small proportion of children would be formally diagnosed as being "addicted" to Minecraft (current research suggests only 1-3% of all children would be diagnosed as "addicted" to technology). To be genuinely "addicted" to technology, there are multiple "symptoms" that need to be present (and a formal, medical diagnosis is also required). However, many children do form very strong attachments to Minecraft (and other technologies).

Instead, of considering your child's Minecraft "obsession" as an "addiction" I propose that we re-frame our thinking. Perhaps we think of children's Minecraft obsession as them forming **poor media habits**. If we think in terms of "media habits" then that gives parents a sense of control over shaping and modifying these media habits (as opposed to simply labeling them as "addicted" to Minecraft).

So, why are children so "obsessed" with Minecraft and forming these (undesirable) media habits?

Minecraft looks quite simple at a surface level but it's actually quite complex and challenging.

- Children are appropriately *challenged* when using Minecraft and this often induces a "state of flow" whereby children are so engrossed in what they're doing that they genuinely lose track of time (a similar thing happens to adults when we're engrossed in a project or our work).
- There's a *constant novelty* as something new is always happening in Minecraft.
- There's also *no definitive end* to Minecraft. Hence, why it's so difficult for children to switch it off at the exact time that you ask.
- The fact that children play in *first-person perspective* is also appealing, as children often feel like it's an authentic experience. This can be more pronounced for children who are still learning to distinguish between fiction and reality.
- The wealth of *experiences beyond the screen* also makes Minecraft appealing, as children can read websites and watch You Tube videos about Minecraft.

It's important to remember, like any technology, or anything in life that children experience that's pleasurable, there's often a release of **dopamine** in their brains. And Minecraft is no different. When children solve a complex problem in Minecraft, or defeat a zombie, there's often a release of dopamine, the feel-good hormone. And then they want more and more of the same feeling. They then crave more and more of the dopamine squirts. Hence, why children can quickly form "poor media habits" with Minecraft.

How can you manage their "media habits" with Minecraft?

1. Establish a Minecraft Management Plan

Define your Minecraft parameters *before* you download it. Don't let bad habits start (as they're hard to break). Establish Minecraft rules before it's downloaded and used (you can also do this retrospectively if you've already downloaded it, but it certainly is a lot harder). Create a family "Minecraft Management Plan" about *when* they can use Minecraft (identify tech-free days or times of the day), on *what* devices they can use Minecraft (is it okay for them to play it one tablets and mobile devices, or do you only want them using the computer?), *with whom* they can play (do you want them playing in multiplayer mode, or only independently?) and *where* they can play (keep devices in visible places around the home).

2. Help them to self-manage Minecraft

Establish when they should turn it off and encourage them to do this independently. When they do it independently, praise and encourage them to do this again.

3. Learn how to stay healthy

Talk to your child about the negative effects of excessive screen time (lack of sleep, diminished friendships, weight issues). Talk to children about these real issues, as it helps them to understand why you want to monitor their Minecraft use (and that you're not simply being a nagging parent).

4. Help them transition away from Minecraft

Provide structure and cues to help your child transition away from Minecraft (as there are no explicit stopping points, or a finishing line in the game). This is why it's important to avoid situations where you simply demand that they turn Minecraft off instantly. They need some warning and some help transitioning away from it.

Navigating Minecraft Safely: What Parents Can do For Peace of Mind

There's no doubt that parents need to be actively involved if their child is using Minecraft. Whilst there are some things that parents can do to ensure Minecraft is used appropriately and safely, no filter or control setting is better than parent involvement. In addition, the research has consistently shown us that children actually benefit from parents being involved in their child's technology use (co-viewing).

If you child is playing in Multiplayer Mode, be aware that they're often playing on public servers, and so your child *may* access inappropriate content and may be subjected to interactions with less-than-desirable people.

> *Would you let your child play in a playground or your local area without any supervision, or without knowing who he/she was playing with? The same applies to Minecraft.*

Practical Parent Tips-

- Teach children about cyber-safety and teach them what's appropriate to disclose online (for example, appropriate user names and disclosing passwords).
- Ask permission before downloading any mods.
- Use virus protection if playing Minecraft on your computer.
- Download mods from reputable sources.
- Limit the number of mods downloadable.
- Back up your computer before you download any mods.
- If you're not comfortable with your child playing in Multiplayer Mode, only allow your child to play classic Creative Mode (which is single player mode).
- Use a LAN (local area network) that interconnects computers within a limited physical area.
- Start your own multiplayer server (a controlled server to play with friends). This may require some help form another tech-savvy parent, or a professional who can set this up for you (or even a tech-savvy teenage you may know).
- Set up a Minecraft Realm, which is a server run by Mojang (the company which owned Minecraft up until mid-2014). Minecraft Realms costs approximately $13/Month.
- Only allow your child to use servers run by people you know (friends or family members).
- Turn off the text chat, which is available in multiplayer mode.
- Specify and select the server/s that you want your child to use.

Be mindful that some aspects of Minecraft may be too emotionally intense for some children (there are some distressing sound effects, players need to kill when playing in Survival Mode, items can be stolen and characters killed when playing in Multiplayer Mode). Coping with these on-screen events may not be within your child's emotional realm and development and may cause them unnecessary stress.

So what do you do if your child still wants to play Minecraft (but doesn't want to experience some of the intense emotions)?

Practical Parent Tips

- Use the F5 key if playing on the computer- it toggles Minecraft between the 1st the 3rd person perspectives
- Use the creative mode (as there are no monsters and no killing)
- Allow your child to practice attacking monsters in creative mode before using survival mode (if this is something that you and your child's comfortable doing).
- Use single-player mode
- Turn off chat facility

Learning With Minecraft: Yes They Really Can Learn With Minecraft

It may come as a surprise to learn that children *can* actually benefit and learn with Minecraft. The trick for parents is to be actively involved and look for the teachable moments.

So, what can they actually learn when playing Minecraft?

1. Sophisticated Thinking Skills

When children play Minecraft purposefully they can develop planning, problem-solving and communication skills. These skills are referred to as "Executive Function" skills and they're a critical suite of skills that help children become successful learners.

2. Reading & Writing Skills

Minecraft users can use the book and quill tools to create (and read) online books.

3. Maths Skills

There are a host of incidental and procedural maths skills that children can acquire when using Minecraft (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division). Because they're playing in an "authentic" world, their mathematical skills can have a cascading effect (one maths skill can lead to another).

4. Geometry Skills

Given that Minecraft is based on shapes, it's a great way for children to learn the names and attributes of various 3D shapes including cubes, cuboids, square-based pyramids.

5. Music Skills

When children use Redstone circuitry, they have the opportunity to use the Note Blocks which can enable them to learn about notes, octaves and chords (in a playful context).

6. Language Skills

Children can use the options menu and select various languages to use while playing Minecraft. This certainly won't teach them a second language, but it may allow them to identify and comprehend a few words of a foreign language.

Maximising Minecraft: How Parents Can Ditch the Guilt & Worry

If you're comfortable with the idea of your child playing Minecraft and feel that they would benefit from using it, there are some simple things that parents can do to ensure their child gets the most out of their Minecraft time (hey, we may was well try and 7aximize the time that they spend with Minecraft).

Tips–

Co-View with Your Child-

Join in and play Minecraft *with* your child(even if it's not exactly your cup of tea). This not only allows you to keep an eye on what they're doing, but it also shows them that you're interested in what they're doing. If your child knows you're genuinely interested and capable of playing Minecraft they'll be more likely to come to you if there's a problem in the future. And, all children love teaching mum or dad something!

Establish a Minecraft Media Plan-

See the above section How You Can Manage Their Minecraft Media Habits. Set limits from the beginning and enforce these. It's definitely worth it in the long run because you're helping your child form media habits that will last them a lifetime.

Determine Healthy Amounts of Minecraft for Your Child-

For some children a little bit of Minecraft goes a long way. Determine how much time you want your child using Minecraft and try to stick to these time limits.

Ensure Your Child Is Developing Healthy Postures When Playing Minecraft- Given that children often spend a lot of time playing Minecraft, you want to ensure that they're using tablets, gaming consoles and computers in ergonomic ways. Encourage them to bring devices to their eye level (and not their bodies to the device) and take regular screen breaks to re-calibrate their posture.

Ensure Your Child Is Developing Healthy Eye Habits When Playing Minecraft- Much like above, it's critical that we teach children how to form healthy eye habits if they're using devices for substantial periods of time. Encourage your child to take 20-20-20 breaks where they take 20 second breaks away from screens, at least every 20 minutes and look at something at least 20 feet (approximately 6 metres away). Also encourage your child to use devices in well-lit rooms and avoid bright lights projecting directly onto screens (to prevent squinting).

Final Words-

Minecraft *can* be a great way for children to learn and also develop some important academic and social skills. But in order to do this, it's imperative that parents assume an active role and play and supervise Minecraft when it's being used and adhere to time limits to ensure it's used in appropriate ways and for appropriate amounts of time.

For more information about how children learn and develop in a digital age, click here to receive 'Raising Digital Kids' which are tips, tricks and tools emailed to you for FREE each week.