

THE IMPACT OF VIDEO GAMING ON 0-12-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN'S VISUAL COGNITIVE ABILITIES: NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

This narrative review explores the growing prevalence of video gaming among children and its impact on their visual cognitive development, particularly attentional mechanisms and visual information processing. As games are introduced at younger ages and become increasingly prevalent, concerns emerge about their effects on developing cognitive systems. The review synthesises current evidence on how fast-

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paced video games challenge children's visual processing, filling a gap in the literature, which has mostly focused on adolescents and adults. It outlines childhood gaming habits, key visual cognitive developments, and the effects of gaming on these processes. Research suggests that video gaming can enhance spatial-visual attention and stimulus processing speed; however, the effects vary depending on age, game type, offline engagement, and parental involvement. Early and excessive gaming may lead to cognitive overload and attention difficulties that extend beyond gaming contexts. While games may enhance divided attention, these skills often fail to transfer effectively to real-world tasks, such as learning. The review concludes with practical considerations for age-appropriate, balanced gaming to support healthy cognitive development.

Keywords: video gaming in childhood, cognitive effects of video games, narrative review

Disciplines: psychology, education

Absztrakt

A VIDEOJÁTÉKOZÁS HATÁSA 0-12 ÉVES GYEREKEK VIZUÁLIS-KOGNITÍV KÉPESSÉGEIRE: SZAKIRODALMI ÁTTEKINTÉS

Jelen szakirodalmi áttekintés a videójátékok egyre növekvő elterjedtségét, valamint annak hatását vizsgálja a gyermekkori vizuális kognitív fejlődésre, különös tekintettel a figyelmi mechanizmusokra és a vizuális információfeldolgozásra. Mivel a videójátékok egyre fiatalabb korban jelennek meg és egyre elterjedtebbek a gyerekek körében, aggodalmak merülnek fel a fejlődő kognitív rendszerekre gyakorolt hatásaikkal kapcsolatban. Az áttekintés összefoglalja a jelenlegi kutatási eredményeket arról, hogy a gyors tempójú videójátékok milyen módon állítanak kihívást a gyermekek vizuális feldolgozó rendszerének működése elé. Ezzel fontos hiányt pótol a vonatkozó szakirodalomban, amely eddig elsősorban a serdülő- és felnőttkori hatásokra fókuszált. A tanulmány bemutatja a gyermekek videójáték-használati szokásait, a vizuális kognitív fejlődés főbb állomásait, valamint a játékhasználat ezekre gyakorolt hatásait. A kutatási eredmények szerint a videójátékok javíthatják a téri-vizuális figyelmet és az ingerfeldolgozás sebességét; ugyanakkor ezek a hatások az életkortól, a játék típusától, az offline tevékenységek arányától, valamint a szülői bevonódástól függően eltérően lehetnek. A korai és túlzott mértékű játékhasználat kognitív túlterheléshez és figyelemzavarokhoz vezethet, amelyek túlmutatnak a játék kontextusán. Bár bizonyos videójátékok javíthatják a megosztott figyelmet, ezek a készségek gyakran nem vihetők át hatékonyan a valós életben jelentkező feladatokra, például a tanulásra. A tanulmány gyakorlati szempontokkal zárul a kiegyensúlyozott játékhasználattal kapcsolatban, amely elősegítheti az egészséges kognitív fejlődést.

Kulcsszavak: videójátékozás gyerekkorban, videójátékok kognitív hatásai, áttekintő tanulmány

Diszciplína: pszichológia, oktatás

Introduction

Digital activities have become an integral part of children's daily lives, with video gaming emerging as one of the most prevalent forms among those under 12 years of age (Ofcom, 2024). The rise of touchscreen devices has made gaming more accessible even to very young children, raising

concerns about its impact on cognitive development.

Video games demand rapid visual processing in dynamic environments, intensively engaging the developing visual cognitive system. Given that children's nervous systems are still maturing and highly sensitive to external input (e.g., Moyano et

al., 2022), understanding the cognitive consequences of gaming has become increasingly urgent. The cognitive effects of video games have been examined predominantly in adults and adolescents (e.g., Sampalo et al., 2023; Virgilio, 2024), while research focusing on younger children remains limited. This narrative review seeks to address this gap by exploring the specific ways in which video gaming may influence the development of visual cognitive functions during early and middle childhood. Recognising both the potential risks and benefits is essential – not only to prevent harmful outcomes through informed interventions, but also to identify and harness possible cognitive gains, particularly in contexts where video games are integrated into educational or developmental frameworks.

This narrative review aims to examine both the correlations and the short- and long-term effects of video gaming on the development of children's visual cognitive functions. It begins by summarising gaming habits in children aged 0–12, followed by an overview of visual cognitive development, and concludes with an analysis of the relationship between gaming and visuo-cognitive outcomes. Ultimately, the review highlights practical implications for educators and caregivers when incorporating video games into daily routines and educational environments.

Video Gaming Habits in Childhood

Video gaming is the second most common digital activity among children, following video watching (Konok et al., 2020; Rideout et al., 2022). In the U.S., 25% of children under 3 already engage in gaming (Levine et al., 2019), and the age of first exposure to online and multiplayer games is steadily decreasing (Ofcom, 2024; Rideout & Robb, 2020). Children under 8 spend an average of 23 minutes daily on gaming, which rises to 1 hour and 27 minutes for those aged 8–12 (Rideout et al., 2022). Pandemic-related restrictions further

amplified these trends (Donati et al., 2021). Hungarian data reflect similar patterns: three-quarters of 6–18-year-olds play video games, with an average daily playtime of 1.14 hours; 7% play nearly 3 hours per day (Good Gamer, 2021).

Game genres include puzzle, action, simulation, and strategy (Lucas & Sherry, 2004), although overlaps have prompted more refined classifications (Király et al., 2023). In Hungary, sports/racing, strategy, and shooter games (e.g., FIFA, Civilisation, Call of Duty) are particularly popular (Good Gamer, 2021).

Children are drawn to games due to their visually dynamic design, frequent neurological rewards, and immersive experience or “flow” (Han et al., 2007; Lau et al., 2017; Weber et al., 2009). Enjoyment is further enhanced by imaginative content, interactive challenges, and social elements (Ofcom, 2024).

Development of Visual Cognitive Abilities in 0-12-year-old Children

Visual cognitive abilities develop significantly during childhood, particularly up to age 12 (Hendry et al., 2019). This process is shaped by both innate capacities and environmental input, with the latter playing a major role due to the plasticity of the developing nervous system (Moyano et al., 2022, 2023). Everyday experiences—such as object manipulation, movement, and caregiver interactions—support this development (Sun et al., 2024; Werchan et al., 2024). These abilities are also trainable (see Rueda et al., 2005, for a comprehensive review), which may explain why video games can have a notable impact during this sensitive period.

Attention orientation (attention toward specific locations or objects in the environment) begins in infancy, but the ability to control attention intentionally and inhibit responses (i.e., executive attention) matures gradually, continuing into

adolescence (Oakes, 2023). Early attention is primarily stimulus-driven (bottom-up), and even 5- to 6-year-olds struggle to ignore distractions (Bartgis et al., 2008). Top-down control (i.e., goal-directed attention) begins to emerge before preschool (e.g., Holmboe et al., 2021) but becomes significantly more effective around age 6–7 due to the maturation of the executive attention network (Rueda et al., 2005). By the age of 12, children process complex visual stimuli more quickly and accurately (Hommel et al., 2004).

Among attention components, vigilance (sustained alertness to stimuli) appears early, enabling children to engage with their environment (Hendry et al., 2019). During the first four years, sustained attention mostly occurs in social interactions (Bradshaw et al., 2024), though children are still easily distracted (Richards, 1988). Over time, this improves, and school-age children can focus even in distracting environments (Diamond, 2006). Performance is best when tasks are optimally challenging—neither too easy nor too hard (Talalay, 2024)—and feedback helps maintain attention, even in children with attention difficulties (Bubnik et al., 2015).

Selective attention (the ability to focus on relevant stimuli while ignoring others) also improves with age. Preschoolers often struggle to filter distractions (Gerhardstein & Rovee-Collier, 2002), but by ages 9–11, selective attention strengthens, although it still falls short of adult levels (Donnelly et al., 2007). Divided attention (monitoring two visual features at once) is also difficult for young children (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2016) but improves notably around ages 6–7 and reaches near-adult levels by age 12 (Boot et al., 2012; Turoman et al., 2021).

Spatial-visual abilities develop through physical exploration (Misirli et al., 2019) and later through reading (Hoyos et al., 2021). Visual search efficiency improves significantly by the end of preschool and continues to improve until

approximately age 11–12 (Ickx et al., 2017). These skills are linked to oculomotor control (voluntary eye movement), which stabilises around ages 4–6 (Rütsche et al., 2006) and becomes adult-like by age 12 (Bucci & Seassau, 2012).

The Correlations and Impacts of Video Gaming on Visual Cognitive Abilities in Childhood

Compared to routine visual tasks, video gaming immerses children in an exceptionally intense visual environment. The fast-paced, stimulus-rich context challenges their still-developing cognitive systems by requiring constant division and maintenance of attention, rapid stimulus selection, and continuous sensory integration. Success depends on children's ability to adapt swiftly to the changing demands of the virtual world using flexible strategies (Bavelier et al., 2012).

Consequently, video gaming has clear potential to shape the development of visual cognitive abilities. Both regular gaming and structured game training have been shown to enhance children's performance in specific visual cognitive tasks (Bediou et al., 2018; Blumberg et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2013). Studies comparing gamers and non-gamers have found that regular players exhibit more advanced selective, divided, and visuospatial attention, enabling quicker and more accurate responses, as well as broader attentional capacities across spatial and temporal domains (M.-S. Chen et al., 2019; Dye et al., 2009a, 2009b; Dye & Bavelier, 2010).

Video game training offers a way to study gaming's longer-term effects more precisely, showing improvements in spatial-visual abilities (De Lisi & Wolford, 2002; Passig & Eden, 2001), faster visual information processing (Mackey et al., 2011), and greater executive attention efficiency, even in preschoolers (Liu et al., 2019). For example, Flynn & Richert (2018) found that 20 minutes of cognitively demanding video game play

improved executive function in 7–12-year-olds more than the same time spent in free physical activity.

Pujol et al. (2016) found improved white matter integrity in brain areas related to visual processing in children who regularly play video games. Cain et al. (2014) demonstrated that gamers' faster reaction times result from better top-down control over attention, rather than simply quicker stimulus processing. Supporting this, Chisholm et al. (2010) reported gamers respond faster to targets amid distractions while sustaining focus. This suggests that video gaming improves top-down attention control over time, as also noted by Bavelier & Green (2019). These findings indicate that habitual gaming may enhance managing complex visual tasks in daily life (like multitasking or navigating crowds), speed decision-making (e.g., in sports or traffic), and improve adaptability to new or unexpected stimuli (Green & Bavelier, 2003; Trick et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, some studies show contradictory results. Like adults, children who play video games do not always have better stimulus processing than non-players, despite faster reaction times (Heimler et al., 2014; Yuji, 1996). For example, a 9-minute digital game had no greater effect on executive function in 2.5-year-olds than the same amount of time spent on physical activity (Antrilli & Wang, 2018). Samson et al. (2021) found that daily gamers aged 4–7 showed better selective attention but no difference in sustained attention or executive function compared to non-gamers. Other research suggests that intensive use of touchscreen devices, including games, in early childhood (1–6 years) speeds reaction times but weakens intentional attention control over time (Jin & Lin, 2022; Portugal et al., 2021, 2023), possibly outweighing cognitive benefits (Rocha & Nunes, 2020). Additionally, heavy gaming is linked to attention problems and ADHD-like symptoms in young children at home and school (e.g., Gentile et al.,

2012; Jamel et al., 2019). Neuroimaging studies confirm these harmful effects on visual processing and attention control in children and adolescents (Hutton et al., 2022; Kwak et al., 2020). Farchakh et al. (2020) also found that problematic gaming—characterised by poor control, prioritisation over other activities, and preoccupation—is associated with daily attention issues, such as forgetfulness, impulsivity, and frequent mistakes, in children aged 9–11.

The inconsistencies in findings about the effects of video games on visual cognition may partly result from methodological differences, such as the use of varied measurement tools and study contexts (Jeong et al., 2020; Welker, 2022). The clearest evidence for video gaming's positive impact remains the enhancement of attentional functions shown in specific laboratory tasks using screens (e.g., Dye & Bavelier, 2004). At the same time, survey data reveal links between video gaming and common attention problems in the same age groups (Gentile et al., 2012).

To understand these divergent results, additional moderating and mediating factors must be considered. For example, adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to gain more cognitive benefits from video game training than their more advantaged peers, likely due to fewer alternative developmental opportunities (e.g., Sauce et al., 2022; Vashisht & Navqi, 2024). Parental mediation—more common among parents with higher education and younger children (e.g., Kousari & Mehrabi, 2017)—involves encouraging mindful media use, active involvement, and setting limits on content and time. This mediation can reduce negative effects or even boost positive outcomes of gaming (e.g., Antrilli & Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2021). Participation in developmental activities and social interaction outside gaming also protects against potential mental health risks (Liau et al., 2015). Additionally, active video gaming with physical movement (like dancing or sports) shows

positive effects on executive functioning in both the short and long term (Best, 2012; J. Chen et al., 2023).

The type, content, and characteristics of video games influence their effects on visual cognitive development (Cunningham & Green, 2023). Positive correlations are primarily linked to action video games, characterised by fast-moving, frequently changing stimuli that require efficient visual processing and rapid shifting and sharing of spatial-visual attention (Choi et al., 2020; Dye & Bavelier, 2004). Developmental, logical, and strategic games also contribute to strengthening attention control (Choi et al., 2020; Monteiro et al., 2023). Li et al. (2018) found that exposure to unrealistic, fantastical content on traditional screens reduces executive function efficiency in preschoolers; however, this negative effect is not observed during interactive play with similar content. Conversely, increasing evidence suggests that violent, fast-paced, and chaotic video games have pronounced negative effects on children's attention processes and cognitive performance, even after short periods of exposure (Brawer, 2015; Ceranoglu et al., 2023).

The motivational features of video games (e.g., challenges, rewards, social interaction opportunities) promote prolonged engagement, which can influence development in varied ways. Greater cognitive involvement may enhance developmental effects (Alghamdi & Holland, 2017; Flynn & Richert, 2018). However, excessive immersion can lead to problematic use in children, similar to adults (Griffiths & Nuyens, 2017). Personal motivation also impacts cognitive effects; for instance, children who game to alleviate stress or compensate for unmet emotional needs may experience impaired development of key competencies due to excessive, unilateral gaming (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

Pre-existing attention problems also influence how video gaming affects cognition. Children with

attention deficits often play more video games, partly because these games satisfy their need for stimulation and trigger the release of dopamine in the brain (Lee et al., 2017; Masi et al., 2021). However, attention problems are a key risk factor for problematic gaming, which in turn may worsen everyday attention difficulties (Bender et al., 2020; Paulus et al., 2018). Concurrently, consciously designed therapeutic games can support attention and executive functioning in children with ADHD (Hou et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2025).

The cognitive effects of video games are significantly influenced by the child's age, due to developmental differences in their visual and attentional systems. Studies show that while physical activity is more beneficial for executive functioning in preschoolers, cognitively demanding video games are more effective during school years (Antrilli & Wang, 2018; Flynn & Richert, 2018). Early intensive gameplay—before school age—may harm executive attention development more than if started later (Jin & Lin, 2022; Portugal et al., 2021). Still, starting before age 12 may enhance visual cognition more significantly, likely due to greater brain plasticity (Hartanto et al., 2016; Vashisht & Navqi, 2024). Younger children also tend to engage less with aggressive content, which can otherwise impede development (Suziedelyte, 2012). However, benefits are not linear: younger adolescents (11–12 years old) may gain fewer executive function advantages than older teens (17–19 years old) (Zioga et al., 2024).

Additionally, studies suggest that the cognitive benefits of video gaming are strongly influenced by the gameplay's level, following an inverted U-shaped pattern—where moderate gaming yields the most advantages, particularly in younger children (ages 7–9) (Pujol et al., 2016; Tahiroglu et al., 2010). While stimulating digital environments can support learning (Gros, 2007), excessive use may cause cognitive overload and impair performance (Kalyuga & Plass, 2009). Notably, in developing

brains, the line between beneficial stimulation and overload is often narrow.

Highly stimulating, fast-paced video games place heavy demands on the attentional system's limited capacity, depleting the cognitive resources needed for sustained attention and efficient visual processing (Pakai-Stecina & Zsidó, 2023). This effect is intensified by multitasking—such as the simultaneous use of multiple screens—which further impairs attentional regulation and visual efficiency (Cardoso-Leite et al., 2016; Soldatova et al., 2022). These impacts are particularly detrimental before ages 6–8, when executive and attentional control networks are still developing (Darby et al., 2021). For instance, in preschoolers, a 5-minute session of fast-paced gaming temporarily improved spatially shared attention but reduced selective attention (Konok et al., 2021).

Overstimulation may induce cognitive overload—a state of mental fatigue caused by excessive information processing—which impairs everyday attention and behavioural regulation across age groups, regardless of game content (Levine et al., 2007; West et al., 2020). While even adolescents with mature cognitive functions may experience long-term detriments from excessive gaming (Trisolini et al., 2018; Virgilio, 2024), the risks are even greater for younger children, whose neural systems are more vulnerable (Farchakh et al., 2020; Hutton et al., 2022).

Exposure to highly dynamic gaming environments has been linked to increased reliance on exogenously driven attention—attention triggered by external stimuli (Portugal et al., 2021). While this may enhance responsiveness during gameplay (Anderson & Druker, 2013), overexposure can habituate the nervous system to intense sensory input, weakening top-down attentional control in low-stimulation settings such as classrooms or daily routines. This shift may lead to heightened novelty-seeking, attentional instability, and reduced processing efficiency in

tasks requiring sustained, internally directed attention (Christakis et al., 2012; Gentile et al., 2012). Since educational contexts typically demand systematic processing rather than reactivity (Landhuis et al., 2007), excessive gaming may compromise children's ability to maintain focus. Although short-term improvements in selective visual attention may occur (Trisolini et al., 2018), long-term overexposure has been linked to persistent attentional control deficits, which can sometimes resemble symptoms of ADHD (Chaarani et al., 2022; Gentile, 2011). Moreover, excessive digital stimulation has been linked to rapid but superficial processing styles (Steenbergen et al., 2015; Tan & Xu, 2020), which can hinder performance in cognitively demanding learning environments.

Although ongoing research continues to examine the extent to which video game - enhanced cognitive abilities can be transferred to everyday tasks (Green & Bavelier, 2012; Mayer, 2014; Simons et al., 2016), current findings suggest that while visual processing efficiency may improve, such gains often fail to translate into better performance in contexts requiring sustained attention, impulse control, or goal-directed behaviour (e.g., academic learning or task persistence).

Pedagogical and Educational Implications

These findings suggest that, when used appropriately, video games may serve as valuable tools for developing specific cognitive abilities in children. Therefore, educators and caregivers should recognise the potential benefits of video gaming, particularly fast-paced games that demand rapid information processing and divided attention.

However, it is crucial to balance these benefits with awareness of potential risks associated with excessive or inappropriate gaming. Age-appropriate guidelines should promote moderate, time-limited, and content-conscious use of video games, especially during early childhood when cognitive

and neural systems are still developing. Parental mediation and structured guidance can maximise the cognitive gains while minimising the risks of cognitive overload, attention deficits, or reduced performance in everyday tasks. Additionally, fostering both offline cognitive and physical activities alongside video gaming can provide a well-rounded developmental environment.

Integrating media literacy and self-regulation strategies into early educational curricula can further empower children to engage consciously and critically with digital media. This balanced pedagogical approach acknowledges the dual nature of video games, recognising them as both potential cognitive enhancers and sources of risk, while aiming to support healthy attention development and overall cognitive well-being in growing children.

Summary

In the contemporary era, video gaming has become increasingly prevalent among children, with a notable decline in the age at which this activity typically begins. Fast-paced games present a visually challenging environment, requiring players to rapidly identify target stimuli amidst distractions, thereby exerting considerable pressure on children's still-developing visual and attentional systems.

Research has shown that such games may enhance spatial-visual attention and the speed of stimulus processing. However, excessive and early exposure to video gaming can lead to cognitive overload, potentially resulting in attention deficits and impairments that extend beyond the gaming context. While these games may train children to process stimuli quickly and divide their attention efficiently, the skills acquired are often less applicable in everyday static tasks, such as learning or classroom activities.

Practical implications regarding the pedagogical and parental management of video gaming,

including recommendations for age-appropriate guidelines and balanced digital media use, are discussed in a separate section.

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