



# It's Been a Fortnite Since I've Felt This Way

Dr. Matthew Liebman

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In recent memory, there has not been a game that has captured the attention of children, teens, and adults alike quite like Fortnite. What is it that makes the draw so powerful? Almost more importantly, why is it that parents are having such a difficult time managing boundaries, rules, and limitations regarding time that their children spend playing?



## Providing Immediate Gratification

Most individuals, especially children, often crave experiences where gratification is not only instant, but **intermittent**. Sure, it is nice to be able to predict exactly what kind of reward you are going to receive for a particular behavior. For example, kids like knowing that every time they say “please” they get a “good job!” from a parent. From a behavioral perspective, the only thing that is more powerful than this in terms of predicting engagement in a behavior is the *allure* of the *potential* for reward that has happened before **either to us or to those around us**. Consider why slot machines are so enticing, for example. With each pull on the lever, we wonder, “could it be this time?” When it is not, our next pull yields exactly the same response: “well, maybe it will be this time.” If we see someone nearby us win a jackpot, or hear

a story of someone close to us who won some money, we think, “it happened to them, so if I play then it could happen to me too.” When the reward is present yet intermittent (i.e. it is not 100% predictable when the reward will present itself, but we know that it eventually could) then engagement in a particular behavior is at its highest.

This is what makes Fortnite such a powerful draw. Players enter individual matches without knowing how each round will unfold; they may last for 30 seconds because they could not find powerful enough gear on time and another player got the best of them, or they might be the last player standing out of 100 real live people per round, which would then crown them with a “Victory Royale” for that round. Players can search for weapons, shields, and fun accessories that make gameplay unpredictable and different each time. Sometimes players might find treasure chests filled with different gear to make them more powerful, other times they might not. The game itself is also continuously updated with new things to get (i.e. different character costumes, different guns to use) all of which are associated with how “cool” one is in the game.

Of note is the fact that the allure of winning a round is more powerful than the win itself in terms of the psychology involved. Many parents will often ask, “if you do not ever win, why bother playing?” It is because of the intermittent reinforcement provided within the game. The *potential* for the *possibility* of the win and for obtaining the gear, even if only briefly, is rooted in the principles of operant learning and strong enough to keep players coming back for more.

## Fortnite is Social

Parents will often say that they recommend to their children that instead of playing Fortnite, they should “go out and be social.” The child then responds with, “I am!”

From the child's perspective, Fortnite is an intensely social experience with similar social demands and pressures that children face in the "real world." Each round that gets played includes 99 other individuals who are online playing at the exact same time, some or all of which a child can talk to through their headpiece/microphone and interact with.

Their performance in the game, as well as their ability to help others on their team is equated with a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (one's belief in their own self to be able to succeed at a given task). This is why often when a child is "out of the game" they will continue to watch others play: a win for the team members that are still active not only counts as a win for them individually too, but the act of sticking around is seen as supportive, engaged, and social. Leaving the game when one's friends are still alive and playing is equivalent to going out with your friends for ice cream, and then leaving once you are finished with yours even if your friends are still eating theirs.

This is also a part of why it is often so difficult for kids and teens to stop playing. It is not just the game that they are being asked to stop and put down; they are being asked to relinquish access to their social world. Imagine being 14-years-old and having your parents walk into the room where you were hanging out with four of your friends and saying, "time's up, we're leaving." This is what parents are asking of their children when they tell them to stop playing, and is at the root of the anger and defensiveness that is often displayed.

### Tips and Strategies

First and foremost, parents need to **learn about the game** that they are asking their children to stop playing. Hopefully, you have done a little bit of that by reading this piece thus far. Parents must know how to use the lingo of the game so that they have some credibility when trying to set boundaries and limits around it. For example, if you ask your child to "stop playing The Fortnite," they will likely appraise you as a non-credible source of information as a result of the language you've used, thus calling into question whether or not you "know what you are talking about." A suggestion: if you have not yet done so, try asking your child if it is okay to watch them play. Get excited with them, point out opponents they might not see, and even get frustrated with them when they do not win. Join the excitement first so that you can not only understand it better, but also so that your children see you making an effort to understand their world instead of taking the assumptive stance that you already know what you are talking about (even if you already might).

Second, parents need to **validate the child's perspective** before enforcing a boundary. Do not simply state that the child needs to stop playing by 10:00pm "because I said

so." Begin with, "I know it's important to you to play tonight because all of your friends are playing and you want to hang out with them." Then, take a pause. Refrain from using the word "but" and use the word "and" instead. Finish with, "... and, time's up at 10:00pm tonight, so make sure you are ready to stop by then." Explain to them what "stopping" looks like.



Be specific, and let them know that "to stop" means to "sign off when asked, turn the PS4/X-Box off, and turn the TV off." If you feel like you are being too specific, you are probably doing it right.

Third, and almost most importantly, **say what you mean**. Do not say that the child must be done playing by 10:00pm and then undermine your own authority by extending the curfew to 10:15, 10:30, etc. Your child will learn that you don't mean what you say, and that if they push back hard enough they can continue to get what they want. If you are addressing this issue with another parents (i.e. partner, co-parent, spouse) then make sure you are in agreement on what the boundaries are *before* you set them with your child. If one parent sets a limit on time played that the other parent then conflicts with, the child will get mixed messages and will learn that they can get different things from different parents; it is important to present as united a front as possible so that the messaging for your child is consistent and predictable when setting limits. This puts the ownership for the consequences of both adherence and non-adherence on them.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule and boundary that you can and will set. When making an exception, be clear that it is an exception and about *why* the exception is being made so that the child can connect consequence with behavior. Taking into account all of these strategies will increase the likelihood that Fortnite and other similar games will become less of a source of stress in your home.

*Dr. Liebman is a licensed psychologist practicing at Watchung Psychological Associates in Warren NJ.*

Matthew G. Liebman, Psy.D.  
(908) 757 - 1399 x4  
drmatthewliebman@gmail.com

Watchung Psychological Associates  
<http://www.wpaapc.com>