

February 1st, 2019

Dear Loma Verde Families,

I spent a good chunk of my time trying to play Fortnite on my phone and my computer. I say

“trying” because what I knew as a kid is still correct – I am not very good at video games. One of the main reasons I ventured into the world of Fortnite is that an overwhelming majority of our elementary age students are playing this game. I wanted to see for myself what the game was about because I didn’t have a clear enough picture from what the students have told me. While I failed to advance significantly in the game, I resorted to what I do best, which is research. I realized that although I have some opinions about the game, I didn’t actually know much about it.

Here are a few facts I learned which I think are important for all parents to know as well.

1. Fortnite Battle Royale is FREE which sets it apart from many other games. Kids can play this game through an app on phones, iPads, computers, and game consoles. There are paid versions and in app purchases but the basic level is FREE. Currently, there are almost 125 million users of the game which was only launched in summer of 2017.

2. Fortnite is a survival game – think Hunger Games. It starts with 100 players and the winner is the last one standing. The entire point of the game is to kill other players although the game calls it “eliminating” or uses such colorful language such as “shotgunned.”. There is a lot of shooting and hacking and sounds that go along with that. You can play it solo, as a duo, or a squad.

3. Players of any age from anywhere can join a game and can talk and type ANYTHING to each other while playing. While many kids play with their friends, when they aren’t available anyone can join your duo or squad. If the chat feature is on, there are no are no filters for voice or text.

4. The games are short and quick which makes it highly addictable. Epic, the creator of the game, provides regular updates to keep the games fresh.

5. Pretty famous dances such as “The Floss” have been popularized by this game. These dances are celebratory dances that players unlock as they advance through the levels.

In my short time playing Fortnite, I heard many other players using colorful language – mostly about my playing ability or lack thereof. I also learned the names of a variety of weapons and heard how easily my fellow players were referring to the use of these weapons. The fuddy duddy old principal in me wants to stop all kids from playing the game but I know that’s not realistic. What I do think is critical, is that all parents have honest and open conversations with their children about this game.

Here are my lessons based on playing and researching the game and listening to our students at school.

1. Parents should be using their best judgement about letting young children play the game. Fortnite is rated “not suitable for children under the age of 12”.

2. Many reviews highlight that the violence is cartoonish and not gory but I think that’s beside the point. The point is that it is a VIOLENT game – the soul purpose is to kill others. I believe what the game is doing is normalizing conversations about guns and killing. I played with the sound on and couldn’t quite even get past the gunshot sounds that are the background of the game as other players get shot.

3. There should be a restriction on how much time a child spends playing Fortnite. Encourage children to play outside and participate in other activities so idle time is not spent playing the game.
4. Make sure to turn the chat option off when your child is playing and if they insist on chatting with their friends, don't let them use headphones so that you can hear the conversation as well. And if you hear anything inappropriate, report the player using inappropriate language.
5. Probably the most radical suggestion – play the game with your child. This will be a great conversation starter and you will be knowledgeable about the game.

In the past few months, there have been multiple occasions where students have used the word “gun” or “kill” at school. Many students aren't playing tag anymore; they're playing killing games where to tag someone is to kill them. A harmless game of tag is being transformed into a trip to the office and phone calls home. The kids who aren't playing Fortnite at home are scared listening to their classmates use words like “kill”.

Due to the current circumstances, there is a heightened response at school around these words. We have to investigate all such instances with due diligence which often times means subjecting students to questions from the principal, other security personnel from the district and even the Sheriff on rare occasions. This process can be traumatizing for the student who said something as well as all other who heard it. I don't enjoy calling parents to repeat the “threats” or call parents to tell them that their child has made a “threat.” After playing the game, I see how the words that are so taboo for adults such as weapons, guns, bullets, are becoming normalized for our little kids. Loma Verde is committed to the safety and security – physical and emotional – of our students. We value our partnership with our parents and community in raising upstanding healthy citizens. Let's work together to help our students navigate through the wonderful time called childhood.

Thank you,
Tehniat Cheema
Principal
Loma Verde Elementary School