

WHY IS MY CHILD OBSESSED WITH WATCHING CHOCOLATE EGGS BEING OPENED ON YOUTUBE?

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Watching a You Tube clip of a Kinder Surprise toy egg very slowly being opened by a pair of tiny hands (or sometimes even a pair of manicured adult hands) is not exactly what most parents would consider riveting viewing. But for our kids, especially our toddlers and preschoolers, they've become infatuated with these "unboxing videos". Yes, many of our little ones have formed a digital obsession over toys being opened from boxes.

So in this article, I'll explain exactly what "unboxing videos" are, why our kids become obsessed with these videos (there's actually a neuroscientific explanation as to why they find it hard to switch them off) and finally I'll share some practical tips for managing these videos (so your child's digital obsession doesn't turn into an unhealthy habit.) Basically, I want to help you understand this bizarre trend and help assure you that you can manage your child's latest digital infatuation, without having to ban You Tube.

What are "unboxing videos"?

Imagine an enthusiastic, adult voice announcing that they'll unveil a new toy and a pair of manicured hands laboriously opening a toy box... sometimes for up to 20 minutes. This is an "unboxing video".

Unboxing videos, where children literally watch videos of other children, or sometimes even adults, unwrap toys on You Tube, have become increasingly popular amongst young kids. They become mesmerised by manicured or tiny hands that hover over toy boxes and slowly unwrap packages and toys. In essence, these are lengthy advertorials, targeted directly at kids. They're very different to traditional 15-second TV commercials. As parents we need to be wary of this indirect form of advertising and the consumerism behaviour it can foster.

The unboxing trend actually started amongst adults with tech enthusiasts unboxing phones and computers and it has now spread to kids' toys being opened.

This is a strange yet very lucrative business. Disney once had an 18 hour unboxing marathon! The kids' unboxing "industry" is reported to be worth millions of dollars. The Disney Collector channel has over 2 million subscribers and some videos have been viewed more than 94 million times! For the video creators (many of whom are now paid by toy manufacturers for their marketing efforts) it can sometimes be a full-time job (for adults and kids!). Unboxing videos have attracted thousands, even millions of viewers and are a lucrative business for some video creators. It's been suggested that some unboxers have been paid up to \$4/1000 views (I'll let you do the sums-cha-ching!).

Children's toy marketers see You Tube and particularly You Tube Kids (where many of these unboxing videos are housed) as an effective marketing tool. As parents we all know how irritating and draining pester-power can be.

Why do kids love those unpacking/unboxing videos?

Many parents admit that they're worried that their little one's interest in watching unboxing videos quickly turns into a digital obsession. In some instances, parents have acknowledged that they're concerned that their child's habit has actually turned into an "addiction" and that turning off these videos always results in the dreaded techno-tantrum.

So what's going on? Why do children become obsessed with online videos and find them so hard to switch off?

I want to clarify that your young child is unlikely to be "addicted" to these videos. However, there's little doubt that their brain is having a strong neurobiological response and this is what's driving their behaviour.

// Dopamine

Watching these fun videos is pleasurable for our little ones so their brain releases dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter. So kids naturally want more and more of that feeling and this is why they find it hard to switch

off these videos and why you often also get the techno-tantrum! Young children can become very dependent on these videos because of the pleasurable state it yields (often with very little effort on their part).

// Adrenaline and endorphins

The anticipation associated with watching a toy being unwrapped actually releases adrenaline and endorphins in the brain. The videos strategically build a sense of anticipation. So when kids are viewing these types of videos they're having a neurobiological response, which makes it difficult for them to switch off.

// State of insufficiency

Kids find it hard to switch unboxing videos off because they enter the "state of insufficiency". That is, they never feel like they're "done" or "complete" when they're watching YouTube. There's always another clip they could watch because of the menu of choices on the right-hand side of the screen. So our young kids don't get that feeling of completion, like they do when they read a book with a parent and get to the end of the book, or finish a jigsaw puzzle. They literally feel incomplete.

How do parents manage unboxing videos?

Basically, you need to establish and enforce boundaries around your child's viewing of unboxing videos. Small doses are likely to be okay, but if they're not carefully managed, your child will find it hard to switch off.

// Have **strict limits** regarding the exact number of videos they can watch. Don't use time-limits with little kids, as they don't understand the concept of time, as it's an abstract concept (kids don't typically understand the concept of time until around 6-8 years of age). Tell them directly, "You can watch two videos today and then you need to turn off the iPad."

// Try to **co-view** (i.e. watch the unboxing clips with your child). I'm a Mum and I know it's not always possible to sit down and watch YouTube with your little one. So as they're watching these videos, ask them questions about what they are viewing and discuss the subliminal ways the toys are being advertised.

// Turn on **safety mode** in YouTube. Sadly, there's a new trend of "digital doctoring" where YouTube clips are being edited after about two or three minutes and inappropriate content is being inserted into kids' content (for example, violent and pornographic content has been inserted into some clips designed specifically for a youth audience).

// **Create playlists** in YouTube and YouTube Kids to counteract the state of insufficiency. This allows you to control the quantity and quality of the videos they can

access. Alternatively, you could use iTunes List app and curate videos.

// If you use the **YouTube Kids app** be mindful that this may be a direct form of advertising for your child. Yes, it's a more kid-friendly experience and there's less chance that there's age-inappropriate content here, but it's not completely safe and the targeted ads are often directly related to your child's interests (based on their viewing habits).

// **Subscribe to quality channels.** Watch (endure) a couple of unboxing clips and if they're appropriate, subscribe to the channel.

// Encourage your child to **make their own videos** of their toys. This develops their language skills and also helps them to appreciate the toys that they have (and hopefully curb the consumerism behaviour that unboxing videos promote).

// If you really don't like your child watching unboxing videos, or if it really drives their pest-power capabilities, don't allow your child to watch these clips. **Remember, you're in control** over what your little one can watch. Find other alternatives that you're comfortable with them watching or simply tell them that you don't want them watching these videos.

Whether we love it or loathe it, technology is here to stay. So we need to teach our kids the best ways to use technology and minimise any potential harmful effects. Digitally-amputating kids is not a solution.



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Dr Kristy Goodwin is on a mission to solve parents' digital dilemmas by arming them with facts (not fears) about raising kids in the digital age (without telling you to ban the iPad, or unplug the TV). Kristy's the author of *Raising Your Child in a Digital World*, written to help parents ditch the techno-guilt and raise happy, healthy kids who thrive online and offline. Kristy takes the guesswork and guilt out of raising kids in the digital age by translating the latest research, into practical and digestible information, tips, and tricks for parents and educators so that they can finally ditch the techno-guilt and feel confident about using screens with their kids.