

Please Pass Daddy the Controller!

Gaming is for Kids of All Ages

By Steven Nester

A peek into Michael Johnson's office reveals that he's not your father's insurance agent. Prominently displayed in an alcove is a large TV with a Wii, one of the hottest gaming systems around.

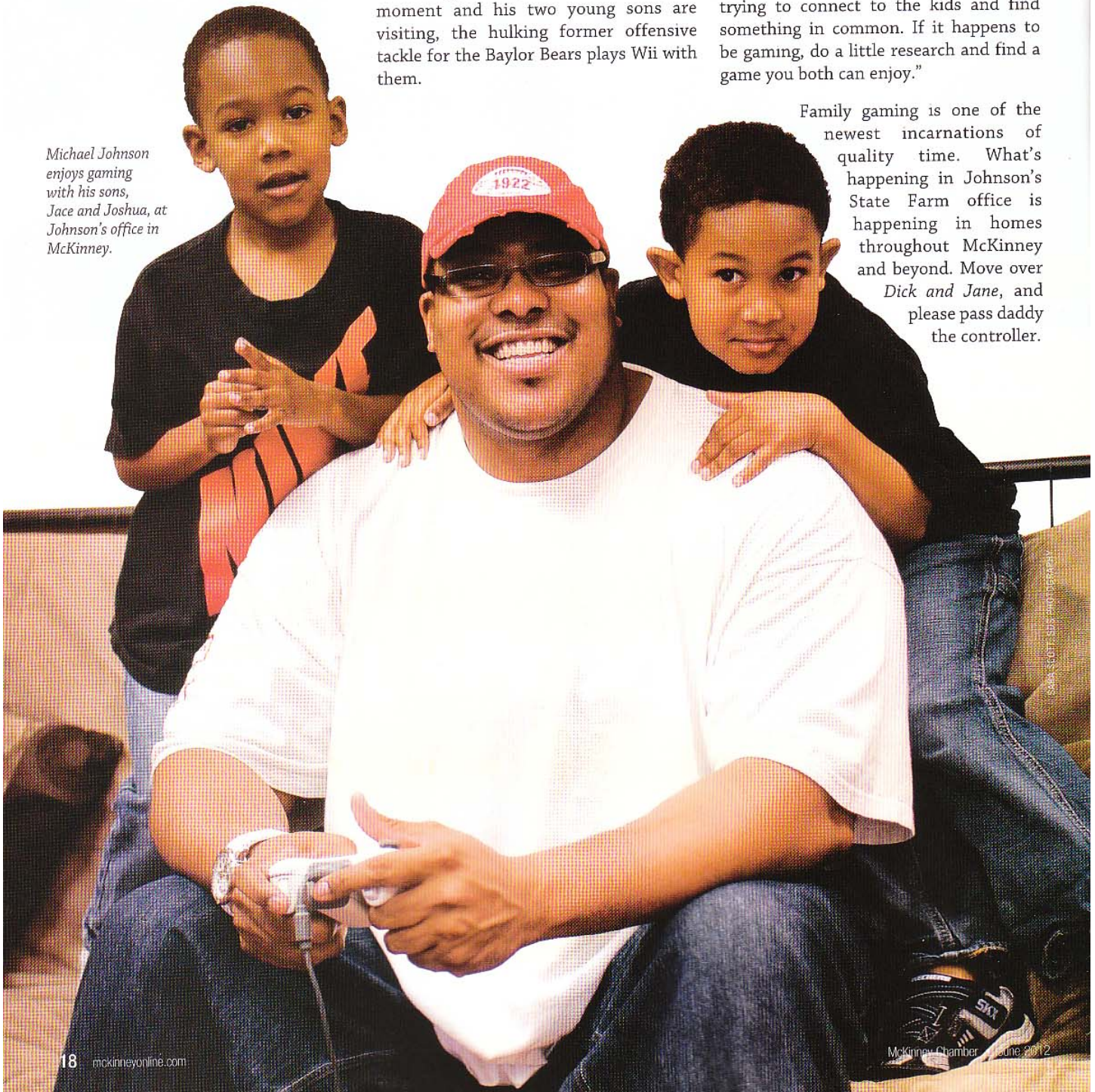
Johnson uses them to occupy the children of visiting clients, but if there's a spare moment and his two young sons are visiting, the hulking former offensive tackle for the Baylor Bears plays Wii with them.

This is not autopilot parenting. Johnson is fully engaged with his children and they are fully engaged with him. Instead of playing Monopoly or checkers, they play an interactive video game.

"Any time spent with children is not wasted time," he says. "As a parent, you're trying to connect to the kids and find something in common. If it happens to be gaming, do a little research and find a game you both can enjoy."

Family gaming is one of the newest incarnations of quality time. What's happening in Johnson's State Farm office is happening in homes throughout McKinney and beyond. Move over *Dick and Jane*, and please pass daddy the controller.

Michael Johnson enjoys gaming with his sons, Jace and Joshua, at Johnson's office in McKinney.





SARA SCOTT, SDS PHOTOGRAPHY

"Interactive video games are a great way to spend quality time with your children," says Art Lambert, North Texas Regional Director for GameStop. "And, it's a great way to teach skills. It's no different from teaching a child how to shoot a basketball. You support, give recommendations, and a rapport can grow."

Parents who eagerly embrace their own childhood shouldn't feel guilty about gaming. Recent university studies reported in the *Wall Street Journal* suggest that video gaming can improve creativity, decision-making and perception.

But most importantly, video games can bring families closer and give parents another avenue of insight into their children.

"Gaming allows parents to learn about their kids," Johnson says. "They can sense a child's attitude, their personality types and what motivates them."

Helping Generations Connect

For some, the love of gaming and its benefits spans generations.

Andrew Gaskill is a local gamer and so is Elizabeth, his 7-year-old daughter. Andrew's father Mike is a gamer as well.

Andrew Gaskill (right), his daughter, Elizabeth, and his father, Mike, all play the Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 together – but not at the expense of other family activities.

The Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 are popular with the Gaskill family, but not at the expense of traditional pastimes.

"Gaming hasn't replaced activities like reading or Girl Scouts or walking the dog," Andrew says. "We still do fun stuff as a family. But with gaming, we have more activities in common that we like to enjoy together."

While father and daughter still have a heart-to-heart over a checker board, gaming has created more opportunities for them to be together.

"Elizabeth and her mom have their own activities in common. But when she and I game together with Wii or PlayStation, it's something only we share," he says.

For grandfather Mike, gaming narrows the generation gap and creates a respite in a hectic world.

"Gaming brings us together in the same room on the same couch when you can find those small windows during the busy week," Mike says.

Dr. Charette Dersch, a McKinney marriage and family therapist, says

gaming helps grandparents, parents and children find common ground – especially if the games are not about technology.

“Games that are more traditional like golf or tennis are good activities for many grandparents,” she says. “They can understand and participate because they’re not about technology. Grandparents won’t shy away from those.”

Learning New Skills

Also, Dersch says, less tech-savvy parents can learn games and gaming systems from their astute children. And, the games themselves are teaching young people new skills.

Johnson sees his sons learning patience, sportsmanship and perseverance. Elizabeth Gaskill is becoming an entrepreneur. She plays a game about starting a jewelry company. “Learning to design products, find customers and save money paid off when it was time to sell Girl Scout cookies,” says Andrew.

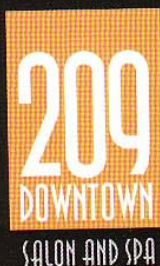
“She jumped right into selling cookies



Playing a variety of games can help parents and children learn new skills together, and even allow a tech-savvy child to teach their parents a tip or two.

without being prompted. She took orders, totaled up the purchase and made change,” he says. “The game showed her

what to do. She wasn’t even learning about money or business in school.”



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Ron Roth games with his two children, 11-year-old Nick and 10-year-old Emily, and he sees clear evidence of their learning.

"Gaming teaches kids how to go through the steps to reach a goal," Roth says. "Nick is into cars, and with his Forza 4 racing game, he can customize his car and tune it. That gets them thinking about logic and building systems. As an engineer I can see that."

Coming Together as Competitors

Roth also appreciates the break from being a dad that family gaming allows.

"The three of us could be playing Wii or Xbox or a computer game by ourselves, but we like to compete against each other and interact as a family. We goof on each other and try to win," he says with a smile. "When you're competing, the playing field is different. It lets us come together as equals and competitors. I enjoy it and so do the kids."

Dersch says it's fine for dads to change roles and put on their game faces.

"Sometimes when kids compete against parents in a family that is healthy and functioning, it shows children that parents are not just authority figures," the family counselor says.

Steve Nix, General Manager of Digital Distribution at GameStop, says his two children are still too young to game but he looks forward to eventually sharing his love of gaming with them.

"Family gaming is here to stay," Nix says. "Game developers will continue pushing creative boundaries to provide previously unimaginable interactive experiences for families that will redefine what we think of as a game."

About the author: Steven Nester is an educator and freelance writer who hosts Poets of the Tabloid Murder, a mystery author interview show that can be heard on public radio.



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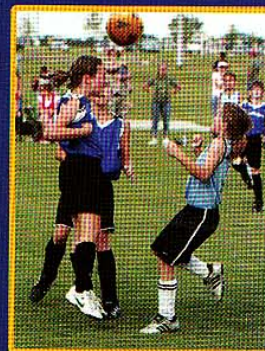
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