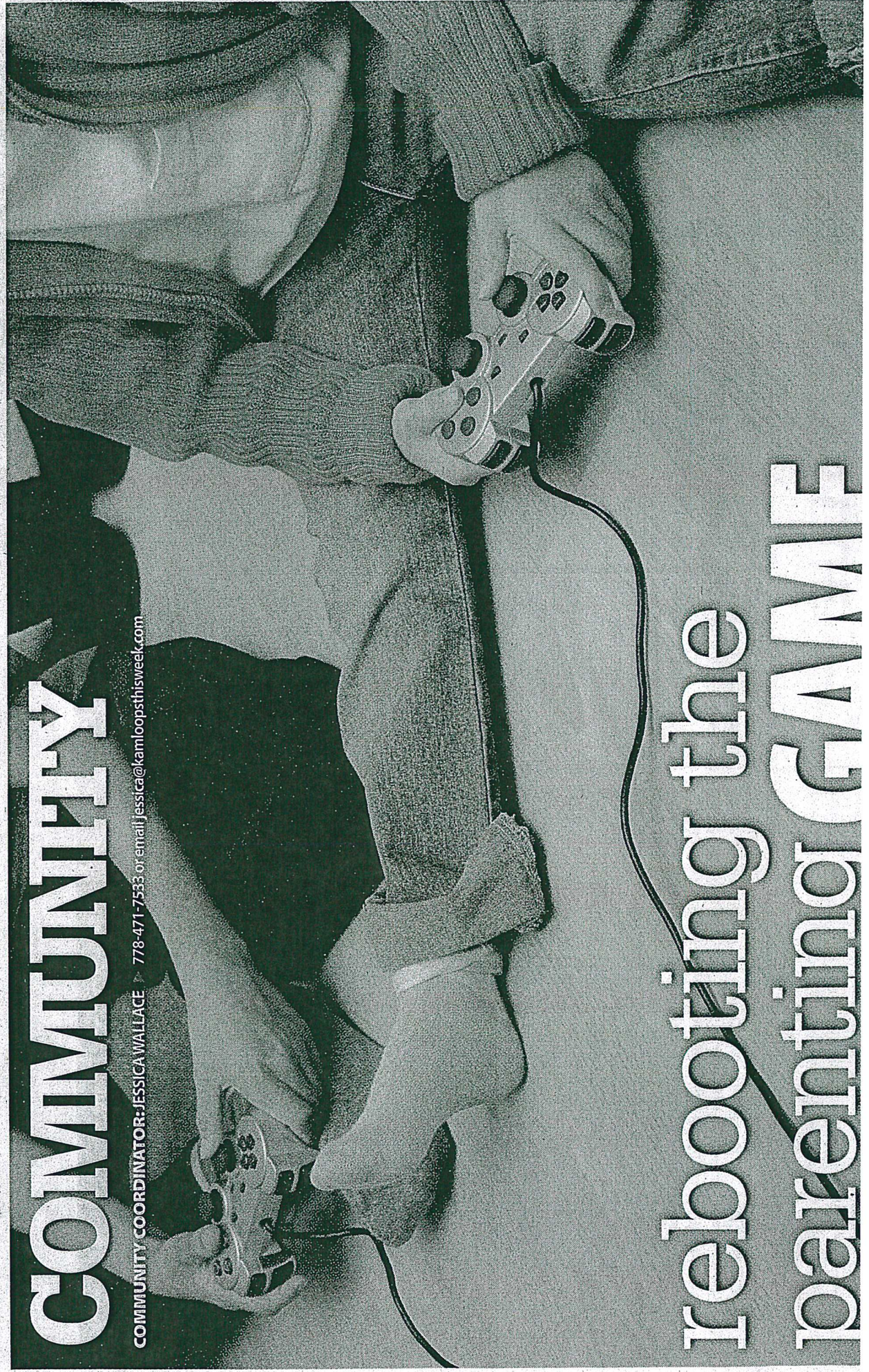


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THURSDAY, January 14, 2016 A11

COMMUNITY

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rebooting the parenting GAME

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When
Merlyn
Horton
was
a kid,
"gaming"

had a different meaning. "It was basketball and hoops," she said. "I was around when *Pong* came out. I was *Ms. Pac-Man* champion in the '80s."

These days, by the time kids complete high school, some will have spent as much time playing video games like *Halo* or *Call of Duty* as in a classroom, a significant portion of their attention that comes with both positive and negative impacts.

"Gaming is huge," Horton said.

The Mission-based con-

sultant will be in Kamiloops to discuss parenting in the digital era as part of Literacy in Kamiloops' Unplug and Play Family Literacy Week, which is from Jan. 23 to Jan. 30.

Her youth outreach background led to the creation of the Safe Online Outreach Society, which is based on the belief children who spend time online need informed adults who know the risks and opportunities of online environments.

In November, the American Academy of Pediatrics published research suggesting children now have almost universal exposure to mobile media devices, regardless of income, due to decreasing costs, marketing strategies and subsidies by cellular service providers.

It said nearly half of chil-

dren under age one used a mobile device daily to play games, watch videos or use apps, with that percentage increasing to 77 per cent in two-year-olds.

It also noted concern over the number of young children with their own mobile devices because little is known about how children's independent activity on mobile devices affects their cognitive, social and emotional development.

Horton said people are only beginning to see evidence and aren't fully aware of the effects on this generation.

It's up to parents to try and understand how things like gaming develop social and language skills, build community and help kids understand "epic meaning", but also how it opens kids up to online harassment,

exposure to violence and explicit images and normalizing online behaviour into the real world.

It can be daunting for parents, Horton said. "Young people now have a place to go to in the world that parents don't have a lot of experience in," she said.

In her upcoming presentation, she will advise parents to manage screen time and set up online codes of conduct. She will also provide conversation starters to discuss online activities with kids.

"It can be for the techno-intimidated," Horton said. "It's not about them knowing the technology."

The free presentation will be held at Henry Grube, located at 245 Kitchener Cres., from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 28. It will focus on early childhood but will also be appli-

cable to school-aged kids. For those who can't make it, here are a few more tips:

- Manage screen time: "New research out is showing that it's affecting social emotional learning," Horton said. "It's taking the place of daydreaming. It's taking the place of random conversations with strangers. It's taking the place of having to self-soothe our anxiety without picking up a device and getting positive reinforcement with our friends."

- Address technology, speak with kids: "It's important we engage and we engage immediately," Horton said. "We have to understand this tiger we've let loose in our kids' bedroom."

- Don't cave to pressure: "We've paid attention to Internet safety. Now, we

have to get specific about parenting, not just caving to the fact that there's a lot of pressure from children ... [because] everyone in Grade 4 has a cellphone."

- Relax, helicopter parents: "When you give a kid a cellphone, they have more processing power, more memory and more computing capacity in their hand with an iPod Touch than NASA had to land a man on the moon and that's kind of overkill [compared to what] they need to get home safely six blocks from school," Horton said.

- Facebook and kids?: "Minimum age for Facebook is 13. Don't go there until then," Horton said. "I don't think parents should post a lot of images of their children. If I construct his identity before he is 18, I've made some choices for him."