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IS YOUR CHILD A GAMING ADDICT?

Gaming addiction is a relatively new phenomenon. When I grew up video game addiction didn't really exist. Kids played video games when they went to the arcade, and were limited to their allowance. Then came the invention of home video game systems, and today millions of homes around the globe are equipped with video game systems and computers. Remember Pac-man and Tetris – my how gaming has changed.

Experts agree that gaming addiction is on the rise. Media expert and researcher Douglas A. Gentile, Ph.D. has done multiple studies on the subject and has found that:

- Approximately 9% of children in one study displayed signs of video game addiction
- Children in the study played video games for a little over an average of 20 hours per week
- Video game addiction involves a lack of healthy functioning in various parts of kids' lives. These can include family life, health, moral values, and school performance.
- Children with video game addiction exhibit behaviours similar to pathological gamblers.
- ADD or ADHD was 2 times as likely to have been diagnosed in children addicted to video games.

When does fun flip into addiction?

Gaming gets into our deepest motivational drivers. As human beings we have a great need to be social. Games allow us to connect with others and give us the feeling of

control over our own social environment. This can be a key motivator for youth who feel like they have very little control over their daily lives; teachers, parents and others always seem to be controlling them.

We are all driven towards pleasure, and the pleasure component in gaming is about intermittent rewards. The rewards are a random, they are not predictable and they keep us waiting and therefore playing. Intermittent rewards are the same foundation that gambling is based on, and researchers are currently looking deeper into the potential correlation between gaming and gambling.

In massive multi-player games there is often punishment for logging off. Fear and pain are again major motivational drivers. Some games like World of Warcraft penalise you for turning it off before you have reached your goal or the next level, thereby losing any progress you made. Now it is the game controlling the player and not the other way around. Once players become involved in a guild then there is the added responsibility to that online community, and when they log off they may be letting other players down. The basic psychological theory of fear and pain overriding pleasure definitely relates to gaming.



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Video game addiction symptoms

- Not able to control the use
- Finds it difficult to stop playing even if they wanted to
- May experience withdrawal symptoms – physical and mood related changes such as bad temper, poor focus, feeling empty, frustrated or angry
- Exhibits defensive behaviour when questioned about use
- Making social and recreational sacrifices – cutting off real life friends and only having online friends
- Secrecy and solitude – doing it alone and even in secret, sneaking it in when they can
- Lying about use – they tell you they spent one hour playing when really it was two

What does this mean for parents?

Have you had yelling matches with your child over the amount of time they spend gaming? Have you threatened to take their access away? If you think there might be a problem, then there probably already is.

Many parents feel alone in regards to their child's problematic internet use, but be assured you are not alone. Parenting experts and parents are beginning to find ways to help with this serious behaviour problem. You can start to help your child by implementing some simple steps:

Set time limits – only allow a certain number of minutes (not hours) per day. Consider requiring that your child earns game time through responsibilities. Once you set the limits, you must enforce them.

Limit content- ratings are there for a reason. Exposure to elements such as violence and gambling are a risk if you allow your child access to age inappropriate or adult content. Read reviews or test the game yourself before you give it to your child. Although they may say “everyone else is playing it”, we know that is not the case.

Keep gaming out of the bedroom – this follows the basic rule of no media in the bedroom. Monitoring content and usage becomes very

difficult behind a closed door. We want kids where they can interact with other people, to help limit that solitude and secrecy that can occur. Interaction with other family members, even whilst gaming is a protective factor.

Gaming is a privilege, not a right – Other activities such as homework and chores must be done first. Having dinner with the family, doing some exercise or music takes priority over games. Families have found it useful to use behavioural charts to clarify what needs to be done before gaming is permitted, and how much gaming is allowed.

Video games are not a babysitter – too many parents are relying on technology to keep their children quiet and occupied. Children and youth must learn to socialise and find the ‘grit’ required to get through social situations. There are other things kids can do to keep themselves busy besides relying on technology.

Search for a therapist – if your child's gaming has already gotten too far out of control, then you may want to search for a professional therapist or treatment program who specialise in adolescent addictions. Recovery from video game addiction is possible.

There isn't anything wrong with gaming itself – it's a great way to have fun, to connect with others and to learn. However, when gaming becomes the priority over other areas of life, then an addiction may be brewing. According to www.video-game-addiction.org “kids who are easily bored, have poor relationships with family members, feel like outcasts at school, or tend towards sensation-seeking are more easily drawn into video game addiction because it fills a void and satisfies needs that aren't met elsewhere”

There is some debate as to whether gaming addiction is a diagnosable disorder, however the behaviour undeniably exists. The combination of intentional programming by designers and the predisposition some teens have to addictive behaviour means this is a real issue that parents, teachers, and friends should be aware of and may need to take action towards.

