

## **Video and Computer Games--An Emerging Concern**

*This month's article comes from Linda Christensen, School Nurse.*

Computers, the Internet, and video games are a constant, prevalent feature of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For many people, computer use and video game play is integrated into their daily lives in a balanced, healthy manner. For others, time spent playing computer or video games is out of balance, unhealthy, and has displaced school, friends, family, sports, and physical health. Recent research on excessive computer game playing (gaming) in adolescents has received increasing public attention.

In his book, "Video Game Play and Addiction: A Guide for Parents", Dr. Kourash Dini states, "Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are the strongest of the habit-forming game types. The average play for MMORPGs (20 hours/week) involves more time invested than is often afforded to a part-time job. Often, players may even put in more than a full-time job's worth". Video and computer game manufacturers admit that MMORPGs are designed to be addictive. World of Warcraft, the most popular of the MMORPGs according to Cyber Psychology & Behavior, boasted over 8.5 million subscribers worldwide in March 2007, at a cost of approximately \$50 per game, and \$15 per week.

According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, games such as World of Warcraft enable the participant to escape to, and become lost in a cyber world that replaces his or her real world, and takes the rules of life and restricts them to only a few. The player has the unique, and enticing opportunity to mediate through a game world until its rules are mastered. Undoubtedly, the chance to flee one's current reality, live out fantasies, interact in a safe social network, and assume a new identity, while feeling involved and in control, holds significant appeal to anyone, but especially to young people. Dr. Dini reports, "Players may also find a reward in the heavy time requirement of these games, as this can be an excuse for not dealing with real-world responsibilities".

In a recent study of over 600 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, the children who spent time playing violent video games were rated by their teachers as more hostile than other children (in the study); more argumentative with authority figures; more likely to be involved in physical altercations; and less successful in academics. Researchers concluded that after playing violent video games for a short period of time, young people experienced an increase in aggressive behavior, thoughts, and feelings.

But aggression is not the only negative result of problematic usage of violent video games. A 2008 study of male college students indicated, "Participants showed significantly negative consequences of excessive video game playing on their cognitive abilities". Further studies, such as one comprised of 7,069 gamers, have confirmed the detrimental impact of habitual gaming on cognitive growth and academic achievement, and raise concern regarding the long-term mental and emotional effects of this impulse control disorder. Researchers conclude, "The addictive potential of gaming should be taken into consideration, especially in adolescents whose leisure activities comprise gaming to a large extent".

Mental health professionals note that adolescents who are frequent and heavy users of video games are developmentally unable to implement self-control in this area, and need proper adult supervision and guidance. Dr. Bill Maier, author of “Help! My Child Is Hooked on Video Games”, writes, “Research indicates that compulsive gaming may create an addiction response in the brain that is similar to chemical dependency”. As a result, children should not be expected to exercise restraint or judgment related to addictive video games. Parents must regulate not only the type of video games played, but also the time children are allowed to play them.

In addition, it behooves parents to remain observant for the 8 Signs and Symptoms of Video Game Addiction (established by the World Health Organization):

1. Most free time, non-school hours, are spent playing video games
2. Fatigue; tendency to fall asleep in school
3. Not keeping up with homework assignments/not turning in homework on time
4. Worsening grades
5. Lying about computer or video game use so computer or video game privileges aren't taken away
6. Choosing the computer or playing video games rather than spending time with friends or family
7. Dropping out of activities such as social groups, clubs or sports
8. Irritable, cranky or agitated (withdrawal symptoms) when not playing a video game or on the computer.

Any of these signs in a child can be considered an indicator of too much time gaming, and a call for action. Limiting video game time, and choice of games, might be sufficient to deal with the problem. But if the signs/symptoms continue, parents may need to remove the computer or game equipment from the home completely. In some cases, video-game addiction is serious enough to warrant professional counseling assistance.

As the prevalence of computer and video games increases, it is paramount that parents are proactive in establishing measures to prevent gaming addiction. In the end, a child's love of video games is not bad in and of itself; video games can be both recreational and educational. Yet, left alone in such a highly enticing and manipulative cyber world, the potential for out-of-control use is daunting. It is the choice and the responsibility of the parent to intercede by setting and enforcing healthy guidelines.

*Numerous books and articles on video/computer games are available, and can provide valuable and practical suggestions and insight.*