



BEAUTY & WELLNESS

DIGITAL ADDICTION

Those hooked on video games and social media often struggle with underlying issues like depression and anxiety.

BY LARRY URISH



Would you hesitate to call 911 if you spotted a teen or tween in your neighborhood shooting heroin? What if this teen was not doing drugs, but spending hours upon hours swiping a finger across their smartphone—texting, surfing the web, watching videos or playing a digital game?

While you'd never call the police to report anyone using a phone, it's important to know that gaming can be as addictive as hard drugs and negatively affects millions of people worldwide. In fact, the World Health Organization added gaming disorder to its International Classification of Diseases in 2018, defining the condition as giving priority to video games over other daily activities and interests for at least one year, despite the

negative consequences of doing so.

Notably, the problem may be more pronounced this time of year, when kids often receive video games and other electronic devices as holiday gifts and spend more time indoors during colder days.

A Deadly Dilemma

In November, a 17-year-old in Thailand died of a stroke after gaming the entire night. While that's halfway around the world, gaming addiction is a problem that's right in our backyard as well. Dr. Sina Safahieh, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian's Pickup Family Neurosciences Institute, recalls that one local teen was gaming 10 to 12 hours a day. "When his dad took away his Xbox, the kid tried to jump

out of his bedroom window," Safahieh says.

At its core, gaming addiction is biological in nature. "Gaming lights up the brain's pleasure centers that are associated with sexual gratification and intoxication, just like hard drugs," explains Jerry Weichman, a clinical psychologist and adolescent specialist at Hoag.

More than 2.5 billion people worldwide play digital games, and an estimated \$152 billion will be spent by year's end on gaming-related products, according to gaming analytics firm Newzoo. A 2019 census by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that rates movies, books and technology for families, reports that U.S. teens average more than seven hours a day on screen media for entertainment.

HOW TO HELP

Talk to your children about the issue.

Limit screen time (that isn't school-related) to only an hour or two per day.

Remove devices from kids' rooms at night.

Encourage your children to be physically active and spend more time outdoors.

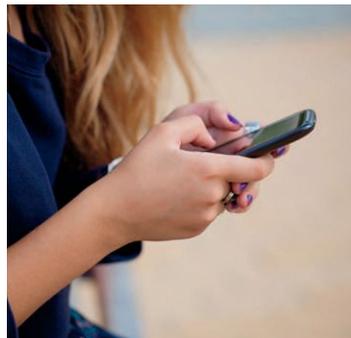
Help your children develop a new hobby.

Encourage face-to-face socializing.

If the problem escalates, take away all devices and set clear, firm boundaries.

Seek help from a therapist to address underlying issues, such as depression.

Contact Hoag Hospital's ASPIRE program for help. (hoag.org)



Spending hours on end playing video games, leading to irritability and even violence, can be signs of an addiction. Top: Hoag's ASPIRE program team helps teens with these kinds of issues.

“Gaming addiction differs from other screen-related problems in that kids are actively engaged in virtual worlds,” Safahieh says. “This reinforces the brain’s pleasure circuits. When that happens, the addiction becomes harder to break.”

Warning Signs

Gaming addiction often serves as an indicator of deeper underlying issues, such as depression and anxiety. “There’s nothing wrong with you if you have a mental health issue: You’re human,” Weichman says. “[But] letting kids numb out their problems through gaming isn’t the answer.”

Depression and anxiety among local teens and tweens have been rising at an alarming rate. And Orange County’s suicide rate jumped 45% compared to an average national increase of 22% between the three-year periods of 1999 to 2001 and 2011 to 2013. For teens, the rate was 29% in OC compared to 22% statewide.

“There are many factors behind this,” Safahieh says. “They have a lot of stress, both academic and financial. Social media—constantly trying to fit in online—is a big problem. Many of these kids are really suffering.”

Some may turn to the alternate reality of video games as a means of escape. They may be fatigued after gaming most of the night for days and may seem depressed or cranky when they can’t play, then appear at ease when back in their digital

universe. Children might also lie about how often they’re gaming, or hide other devices to get their fix.

Safahieh notes that addiction can sometimes escalate to a teen becoming violent or threatening suicide when their game is taken away.

“Some parents have said that trying to take an addicted gamer away from his or her device is like trying to take meat from a tiger,” Weichman says. “They’ll sneak around looking for devices like a crack addict.”

What To Do

To prevent addiction, parents can set screen time limits, then move phones and other devices out of their child’s bedroom at night. Safahieh says kids should not be playing video games for more than an hour or two a day. Parents can also set an example by limiting their own digital activity.

These young adults can also be encouraged to try a new hobby or join a club to reduce time in their digital world. Face-to-face social interaction, school and physical activity should always come first. If push comes to shove, “Parents should take their kid’s game away, period,” Weichman says. “Set clear boundaries and be firm about it.”

If addicted, they may need to see a therapist, plus there’s a local program that teaches coping methods and other skills. ASPIRE, or After School Program: Intervention and Resiliency Education, is an intensive outpatient program at Hoag Hospital

that has helped teens age 13 to 17 deal with gaming and social media addictions as well as other related issues. In ASPIRE, students meet four times a week for eight weeks, learning about stress management, interpersonal communication, resiliency, mental health issues and more. Headed by Safahieh, the program offers five units of elective school credit.

The 14-year-old daughter of Newport Beach resident Sarah Johnson went through the ASPIRE program to combat her social media problem. (Safahieh stresses that social media and other screen addictions are very similar to gaming addiction.)

“She threatened to [harm] ... herself if we tried to set limits. She finally did,” says Johnson, whose name was changed to protect the family’s privacy. “And to feel more popular, she was buying Instagram followers by giving them gift cards. We were desperate to get help.”

In ASPIRE, “Both she and my husband and I learned some great communication skills,” Johnson says, noting that this included “how to de-escalate a situation and different ways to stay calm in the moment. It was really helpful. ... Halfway through the program, we learned that our daughter has more serious issues. We found this out sooner, thanks to the program.”

And, Johnson adds, “ASPIRE showed my husband and I that we weren’t crazy when others said she was just going through a phase. That alone was really helpful.” NBM