

MEDIAWISE[®] NETWORK



Guide to Video Game “Addiction”



NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON
MEDIA + THE FAMILY

“Addicted” to gaming

Hooked on video games

Millions of kids, especially boys, play video games. A national survey revealed that 97% of school-age children play them regularly. Larger than the Hollywood movie industry, video games are the fastest growing form of media entertainment. With their use of cutting edge technologies, video games involve the player in ever-more realistic, complex, and involved gaming situations. For most kids and families, video games are a fun part of a healthy media diet. For others, video game play can start to replace or erode important activities like spending time with friends, doing homework, sleeping and, in some cases, even eating. A growing number of parents are worried that their kids are “addicted” to video games. Of course, a true addiction means more than doing something a lot. An emerging body of research on video game play and youth is just helping us understand the scope of the issue.

What does the research say?

Institute Director of Research Dr. Douglas Gentile collaborated with Harris Interactive* to conduct the first study with a nationally representative sample to demonstrate the prevalence of “pathological” game play among American youth ages 8 to 18. “Pathological” game play is defined as behavior patterns consistent with gambling addiction. More specifically, **pathological gamers exhibit at least six out of eleven symptoms of damage to family, social, school, or psychological functioning.** According to this study, nearly one in 10 young gamers (8.5%) displayed behavior patterns similar to addiction. According to Dr. Gentile, “The study was designed to demonstrate whether pathological gaming is an issue that merits further attention. With almost 1 out of 10 youth gamers demonstrating real-world problems because of their gaming, we can conclude that it does.”

“Addicted gamers”

Pathological gamers (compared with nonpathological gamers) spent twice as much time playing games (24 hr/week), were more likely to have video-game systems in their bedrooms, reported having more trouble paying attention at school, received poorer grades in school, had more health problems, and were more likely to feel “addicted.” More specifically, pathological gamers, displayed at least six of the 11 symptoms, including:

- Lying to family and friends about video game usage;
- Using video games to escape from problems or bad feelings;
- Becoming restless or irritable when attempting to stop playing video games;
- Skipping homework in order to play video games; and
- Doing poorly on a school assignment or test because they spent too much time on games.

Is it a real addiction?

The American Medical Association debated video game addiction in 2007. Its members correctly called for additional research into what many medical professionals saw as a growing problem. So while video game addiction is not yet an official diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Dr. Gentile’s research gives the medical community and parents alike a better idea of the scope of the problem. Given that video game addiction is not yet an official diagnosis, “addiction” is put in quotes throughout this document. However, there is no question that pathological game play is having a real world impact on families everywhere.

What are the symptoms?

The behaviors that we hear most often reported in our clinical experience include:

For kids

- Most of non-school hours are spent on the computer or playing video games.
- Falling asleep in school.
- Not keeping up with assignments.
- Worsening grades.
- Lying about computer or video game use.
- Choosing to use the computer or play video games, rather than see friends.
- Dropping out of social groups (clubs or sports) in order to play games.
- Stealing money in order to buy or play games.
- Irritable when not playing a video game or on the computer.
- Unsuccessful attempts to cut back on game play.

For adults

- Computer or video game use is characterized by intense feelings of pleasure and guilt.
- Obsessing and pre-occupied about being on the computer, even when not connected.
- Hours playing video games or on the computer increasing, seriously disrupting family, social or even work life.
- Lying about computer or video game use.
- Experience feelings of withdrawal, anger, or depression when not on the computer or involved with their video game.
- May incur large phone or credit bills for on-line services.
- Can't control computer or video game use.
- Fantasy life on-line replaces emotional life with partner.

Physical symptoms of addiction

- Carpal tunnel syndrome or other repetitive stress injuries
- Sleep disturbances
- Back, neck aches
- Headaches
- Dry eyes
- Failure to eat regularly
- Neglect of personal hygiene

Take the MediaWise Video and Computer Game Addiction Survey™

If you agree with these statements about your child please check the box.

- My child feels great while playing the video game.
- My child feels unhappy, cranky or irritable when not playing.
- My child is angry or has a temper tantrum when I ask him/her to stop.
- My child craves more playing time.
- My child spends much of his/her time playing games.
- My child thinks about the game when not playing.
- More and more of my child's friends are "online friends."
- More and more of my child's friends are gamers.
- My child would rather play video games than be with family and friends.
- My child neglects responsibilities, such as homework and family chores to play games.
- My child tries to cut back on playing time but can't.
- My child plays more often than he/she plans.
- My child plays for longer periods than planned.
- He/she can't seem to quit.
- My child sometimes lies about his/her playing time.
- My child sometimes sneaks time to play, before school or late into the night.
- My child stays (or wants to stay) home from school to play video games.
- My child spends more than twenty hours a week playing.
- My child continues to play in spite of negative consequences.
- My child has arguments with me about how much time he/she spends playing.
- My child's games turn up as a top priority when he/she takes the **MediaWise "I'd Rather" Assessment**.

*** The more boxes checked, the more likely video game play may be a cause for concern. Thinking about making a change? Please see our [resources](#) page for possible next steps.

MediaWise “I’d Rather” Assessment™

Background

This test helps a gamer see how his/her gaming fits in with other life priorities.

Use this test with children, teens, and adults to help them form a more realistic picture of their attachment to gaming.

A true-life priority needs three ingredients: thought, feeling, and behavior. Only one or two ingredients does not make a priority.

For example, I may think that I value education, but then never study. Education is only a priority if I feel motivated and then act on it. Conversely, behavior alone does not necessarily mean something is a priority. For example, I may show up at a place of worship regularly so the behavior indicates that I value my religion. However, the real reason I show up is because I think it will make me look good in the eyes of my boss who attends the service regularly.

Helping a person form an honest picture of his/her life priorities involves assessing which activities are those where thinking, feeling, and behavior come together.

How to do “I’d Rather” Assessment:

1. With this background in mind ask the gamer you are concerned about to write down a list of all the things they do during the course of a week. The list usually includes things like eating, sleeping, spending time with family, playing a sport, engaging in a hobby, school and/or work, chores, going to movies, studying, hanging out with friends, etc.
2. Then have the gamer check as many of the statements on the following page he/she thinks are true.

“His grades are down the tubes, he skips meals, and he hardly spends any time with his friends.”

- Concerned parent

MediaWise “I’d Rather” Assessment™

- I’d rather play games than hang out with my friends.
- I’d rather play games than play any sports.
- I’d rather play games than spend time with my family.
- I’d rather play games than eat.
- I’d rather play games than sleep.
- I’d rather play games than talk on the phone.
- I’d rather play games than go to school or work.
- I’d rather play games than go to a movie.
- I’d rather play games than watch TV.
- I’d rather play games than use the Internet.
- I’d rather play games than listen to music.
- I’d rather play games than exercise.
- Now, list the things you’d rather do than play video games.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

If you have trouble thinking of things you’d rather do than play video games, they may have become the most important priority in your life and cause for concern. See our [resources](#) page for next steps.

“Computer games are ruining my life. If I’m not playing, I’m thinking about playing. I have, like, no real friends.”

- High School student “addicted” to Everquest

What can I do to prevent “addiction?”

Parent-child arguments about video and computer games are part of 21st century parenting. So don't panic if you have your share of those. On the other hand, don't ignore signs of a real problem with pathological playing. Here are some tips to make sure computer and video game playing remains a positive part of your children's lives.

- Set clear ground rules about when, where, how much, and what kind of game playing is allowed as soon as your child starts to play games.
- Intervene early before things get out of hand.
- Limit video game playing time.
- Have clear consequences if time limits are not observed.
- Enforce consequences consistently.
- Make sure your child is not playing in the middle of the night.
- Require that homework and other chores be completed before game play.
- Keep video and computer games out of child's bedroom.
- Be firm. Consistently enforce the rules. If your child refuses to cooperate, restrict access to video games for a period of time.
- Be clear with your child that constant arguments about game playing will result in loss of game playing privileges.
- Open lines of communication with your child. Is game play a result of insecurities in other areas? Are there underlying issues?
- If nothing else works, go cold turkey. Get rid of the games.
- Encourage other activities. Have younger children help make a list of "Fun Things to Do" and try a new thing every day.
- Use existing tools and resources to help you establish healthy media habits:

GetGameSmart.com

The Institute has partnered with Microsoft to launch the new [Get Game Smart](http://GetGameSmart.com) campaign to help parents and kids establish healthy media habits. Use tools like this to help you kick start a balanced media diet!

Think you or someone you know
is “addicted” to video games?

Want to make a change?

Thinking about making a change?

Deciding to make a change

Discussing pathological gaming habits with your child is not easy. No doubt, you have already had difficult conversations and arguments with your child about their game play. Addressing pathological gaming takes a lot of commitment on your part and the part of your child. Weighing the pros and cons may help you make a firm, committed, parenting decision:

Pros: What are some reasons you may want to make a change?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve my child's school performance. | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve my child's health. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve my relationship with my child. | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce arguments with my child over game play long term. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that my child gets the experiences he/she needs "offline." | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid more serious problems. | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Cons: What are some reasons you may not want to change?

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Compare your pros and cons. Do you think that you see adequate reasons to initiate change related to your child's game play?

Are you ready?

Are you ready to help your child change their gaming habits? If so, the next few pages may support your efforts. If you think you need professional help please see our list of [additional resources](#).

If you aren't sure whether you are ready to change your child's gaming habits, consider these suggestions:

- Keep track of how often your child is gaming.
- Notice how playing video games affects his or her life, relationships and mood.
- Ask for support from your doctor, mental health provider, a close friend or someone else you trust.

Don't wait for your child or family to be in crisis before addressing addiction. When someone is gaming too much, making changes earlier is likely to be more successful than waiting until you are in crisis mode.

Making a change

Should you pull the plug?

If you are trying to help change your child’s gaming habits, you will need to decide whether to pull the plug on gaming completely, or try to cut back to a reasonable number of hours. You may want to discuss these options with a mental health provider. Going “cold turkey” is not advised if:

- You will be unable to enforce the new time rules you’ve set (i.e. don’t make empty threats).
- If you think that your child will harm themselves or someone else if you get rid of the games without the support of a professional.

Strategies for cutting back

If you’ve decided that cutting back on gaming hours is the right choice for your family, here are some strategies to try. Don’t necessarily try them all at once, instead try one or two a week and see how it goes. You could also make a [Family Change Plan](#) to help you solidify your goals and be able to refer back to your commitments.

Keep track of game play.

Encourage your child to track how much they play. Find a way that works for your family such as check marks on a poster, bar graphs, or “screen time cards” (see below).



MediaWise “Screen Time Tickets”

This visual tool helps you monitor the amount of time your child spends in front of a screen (video games, TV, computer, etc.) - a key first step to changing your child’s media habits.

Go to MediaWise [store](#) to learn more about this and other tools.

Set goals.

Decide together how many hours (or half hours) you want to cut back each week.

Balance gaming time with “off screen” time.

Agree that not all gaming hours allocated for the week will be played in one or two days. Instead, try “spacing out” gaming time, mixing it with other activities.

Find alternatives to gaming.

If gaming previously occupied a lot of time, it is important to fill new ‘free’ time with new healthy activities, relationships, and engagements. Maybe this will give your child an opportunity to re-engage in activities they previously enjoyed.

Make a plan to handle power struggles.

When conflict arises over new rules or as you work towards meeting new goals, make a plan for how to address the situation. Agree on rules and consequences beforehand.

Family Change Plan

Make a plan for change

Here is an example of a “Family Change Plan” you can work through together with your child.

Tracker: Right now I play _____ hours a day and about _____ hours a week.

New goal:

- I will play no more than _____ hours on any given day and no more than _____ hours a week.
- I will stop playing video games.

When? I will start on this date _____

Reasons: My most important reasons to make these changes are:

Alternatives: Instead of playing video games this week I will try these activities:

People: The friends and adults who can help me are (list names and how they can help you achieve your goals):

Possible challenges: Some things that might make it difficult for me to cut back on game play and how I will handle them:

Celebrating my achievements: If I achieve my goal for the week I will:

Parent signature(s)

Child signature

Additional Resources

Professional Help

Your regular doctor.

Primary care physicians and mental health practitioners may be able to provide effective video game “addiction” treatment.

Video game “addiction” is an emerging issue so there are not many video game specific counseling or treatment options. When looking for resources in your community, work with someone who will treat video game “addiction” as a primary issue, not as a secondary one. Here are some important things to ask when you are looking for help:

1. Do you believe that video games can be addictive?
2. Have you ever treated anyone for computer or video game addiction?
3. If not, what is your approach for treating addiction?
4. Do you believe that video game addiction needs to be treated directly as a primary problem or merely as a symptom for an underlying problem?

Specialists in video game addiction.

For specialty addiction treatment options, try contacting local mental health agencies. Other resources include:

Community Organizations

Living Beyond Recovery

<http://www.livingbeyondrecovery.com/videogames/cms/videogames.html>

Treatment Programs

Aspen Education Group

<http://www.aspeneducationgroup.com/gameaddiction>
(866) 375-4376

The Center for Internet Behavior

<http://www.virtual-addiction.com/>
860-561-8727

Information resources

Addiction information.org

<http://www.addictioninfo.org/>

The Center for Internet Behavior

<http://www.virtual-addiction.com/>
860-561-8727

CRC Health Group

<http://www.video-game-addiction.org/>
866.869.4530

Healthy Place

<http://www.healthyplace.com/>

Web Aware

<http://www.bewebaware.ca/english/default.aspx>
860-561-8727

Mutual-help groups

Online Gamers Anonymous

<http://www.olganon.org>
(612)-245-1115

Visit www.mediawise.org for an updated list of resources.

Other FREE MediaWise Resources



Take the “I’d Rather” Assessment™ Online!

Use this toll with children, teens, and adults to help them form a more realistic picture of their attachment to gaming. [Assessment.](#)

Take the MediaWise Video and Computer Game Addiction Survey™ Online!

Take this easy to understand survey to learn more about your child’s game playing. [Assessment.](#)

Read Dr. Douglas Gentile’s new study “Pathological Video Game Use Among Youth Ages 8 to 18: A National Study”

This is the first study with a nationally representative sample to demonstrate the prevalence of pathological game play among American youth ages 8 to 18. [Full article.](#)

Read Dr. Dave’s column: “Computer and Video Game Addiction”

“Computer games are ruining my life. If I’m not playing, I’m thinking about playing. I have, like, no real friends.” These are the words of a high school student addicted to the online computer game... [Full column.](#)

Tips to Tame the Video Game Tiger

Read 15 easy tips to ensure that video games remain a healthy part of a balanced media diet. [Tips.](#)