**Managing Gaming – A Guide for Parents**

Many parents will be familiar with the image of their child hunched over their computer or console, eyes fixed in concentration on the screen, oblivious to what is going on around them for hours on end. A survey by ChildWise revealed that school children spend an average of six - ten hours a day in front of screens (TV, games consoles and online). Whilst this may be acceptable occasionally during the holidays it can be prove a huge challenge for parents when you are trying to encourage healthy homework and revision routines.

Online gaming is particularly compulsive. Problems arise when hours of playing time start to encroach on other activities, including schoolwork, seeing friends and even eating and sleeping. As a parent you can exert a measure of control but it is difficult. When the gaming starts affecting family life, homework isn't completed, or if you notice a behavioral change (some children can become aggressive or withdrawn) then it needs addressing.

Why is online gaming so addictive?

Unlike video games where the rewards might be improving your highest score or getting your name on the 'hall of fame', with online gaming, there is no end to the game so there is the potential to play endlessly against, and with, other real people. This can be immensely rewarding and psychologically engrossing. The addiction is caused by the partial reinforcement effect, where you are rewarded often enough to keep playing but not so predictably that you get bored, like fruit machines paying out to gamblers at certain intervals, to make the games more attractive. This critical psychological ingredient keeps players responding in the hope that another 'reward' is just around the corner.

Moderation and common sense play an important role in managing this. Any activity when taken to excess can cause problems in a young person's life. There is lots of evidence suggesting gaming can have very positive effects. It can make individuals feel better about themselves and raise their self-esteem as well as being therapeutic in dealing with stress. If you feel balance is not being achieved then you may wish to consider the suggestions below.

Ten thoughts to consider

1. Gaming should only be allowed after your child has taken care of other responsibilities. For example, parents are strongly advised to set a rule that video games can only be played after homework has been completed (and completed with effort).

2. To prevent computer gaming addiction from taking hold and to regain control after it has been established, games should be played no more than one or two hours per day - especially during the school year.

3. Young people addicted to computer games will happily play for hours at a time. Although this can provide valuable free time for busy parents, you need to make sure that computer games are not your child's primary activity or form of entertainment. Decades ago, parents were warned about using television as a babysitter and the same advice now applies to computer games. It is absolutely critical to set and enforce firm daily limits.

4. Access to computer games should be viewed as an earned privilege, not an automatic right.

5. Regardless of who 'pays' for the computer game, parents should always have final approval of any game that enters the home. Young people addicted to computer games very often prefer the more mature games (violent first person shooters, online role playing games). Parents should become familiar with ESRB ratings and pre-screen all potential purchases. The [ESRB website](#) provides a summary of what your child will be exposed to whilst playing the game. For example, Red Dead Redemption 2 has a rating of Mature 17, and the description of the game includes the following information.

*"Cut scenes also depict intense acts of violence: a man executed from the gallows; a character shooting himself in the head; a man repeatedly electrocuted; a bound man set on fire. Some weapon attacks result in decapitation and/or dismemberment, leaving bloodstains and body parts on the ground"*

6. If it is possible to do so, dedicate one computer for homework only and one for gaming (if this is still permitted in moderation according to your rules). On the work computer, there should be no games installed, social networking sites should be blocked, and gaming websites cannot be accessed. Therefore, when your child is using this computer, you can be reasonable confident that he/she is working and not spending time playing computer games.

7. Keep computers and consoles out of your child's bedroom. It is much easier to limit computer gaming (and monitor online activity) if computers are in open spaces or family rooms. To help children addicted to computer games this is perhaps the very first step parents should take.

8. One helpful tool for dealing with children addicted to computer games is the 'Parental Control' settings that are present on all modern game consoles. These password protected options usually allow parents to control what their children play and how much time is allotted. A quick Google search, for example, for parental controls X-box will provide the details how to set up controls.

9. Consider a ban on MMO or MMORGP games (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) in your home. Even if the ESRB rating is within your child's age range, these games are thought to have a much higher risk for addiction than other genres and should not be purchased if you worry about your child becoming addicted.

10. Consider working with other parents to designate a set game time – perhaps from 7:00pm –
9:00pm so that your child knows others will be online at the same time. If they want to listen to music on their phones whilst revising then ensure airplane mode is switched on.

Ultimately, parents have to take responsibility for making sure that children practice healthy computer gaming and online habits. Teens addicted to computer game cannot be expected to identify this problem themselves and set reasonable limits without the help of parents. Although excessive video gaming can be difficult to stop, with the right approach computer game addiction is very treatable.

Consistency, consistency, consistency is a critical element for managing gaming. Parental words and promises must always match parental actions. If you set a daily limit, it must be enforced. If you have outlined punishments or consequences for ignoring your rules, you must follow through with them. Likewise, promised rewards (other than money or more computer games) for following rules should be honoured.