Addicted to the Web- On-Line Gaming and Pornography
By Jeff Dess
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Kimberly Young, PsyD, clinical director of the Center for On-Line Addiction and author of Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction and a Winning Strategy for Recovery, shares in her article with CBS that, “It’s a clinical impulse control disorder,” an addiction in the same sense as compulsive gambling. There are many young people and adults who end up on gaming websites like Runescape, Star Wars Galaxy, Kingdom Hearts and World of Warcraft, who play the game for fun and when they are done after an hour will get up and go about their day. These young people and adults make gaming a part of their life without having it interfere with them socially, emotionally or spiritually. There are a growing number of researchers who are finding benefits in gaming. Some of these findings report, improvement in hand eye coordination, sharpened mental faculties, and problem solving skills (Sheff). Gaming allows kids the opportunity to interact with others from all over the world. For some kids who are introverted gaming is a way to establish relationships with others. Some young people have reported to me that feeling successful at gaming compensates for feeling unsuccessful in different social situations. They feel welcomed by fellow gamers and accepted by their gaming peers.

There is also a body of research that explores the harmful effects of gaming. Some studies have suggested that playing games that have gratuitous violence can lead to short term aggressive behavior in young people. There is also some research that suggests gaming for excessive amounts of time can lead to obesity and poor health. There are some people who may be just as addicted to gaming, pornography, and other on-line material as those who are addicted to alcohol or other drugs. Listed below are some common definitions of addiction:

1. Addiction: A chronic relapsing condition characterized by compulsive drug-seeking and abuse and by long-lasting chemical changes in the brain. Addiction is the same irrespective of whether the drug is alcohol, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, or nicotine. Every addictive substance induces pleasant states or relieves distress. Continued use of the addictive substance induces adaptive changes in the brain that lead to tolerance, physical dependence, uncontrollable craving and, all too often, relapse. Dependence is at such a point that stopping is very difficult and causes severe physical and mental reactions from withdrawal. The risk of addiction is in part inherited. Genetic factors, for example, account for about 40% of the risk of alcoholism. The genetic factors predisposing to addiction are not yet fully understood.

2. Addiction is a dependence on a behavior or substance that a person is powerless to stop. The term has been partially replaced by the word dependence for substance abuse. Addiction has been extended, however, to include mood-altering behaviors or activities. Some researchers speak of two types of addictions: substance addictions (for example, alcoholism, drug abuse, and smoking); and process addictions (for example, gambling, spending, shopping, eating, and sexual activity). There is a growing recognition that many addicts, such as polydrug abusers, are addicted to more than one sub-stance or process.

3. Morse & Flavin’s (1992) definition of addiction represents the one traditionally utilized by treatment centers and substance abuse counselors. It is very good and touches all of the bases. Published in The Journal of the American Medical Association (Vol. 68, No. 8), Morse & Flavin defined addiction thusly (paraphrased for simplicity): Addiction is a primary, progressive, chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations. The disease is often progressive and fatal. It is characterized by impaired control over use of the substance, preoccupation with the substance, use of the substance despite adverse consequences, and distortions in thinking.

In their book: In the Shadows Of The Net- Breaking Free Of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior by Patrick Carnes, David Delmonico and Elizabeth Griffin, they explore cyber-sex and pornography as compulsive sexual behavior. In some cases this behavior can cross the line into addictive behavior. The criteria for sexual addictive behavior and gaming behavior have significant similarities to addiction in general.

What these definitions and others seem to have in common are the following:

1. Pre-occupation when not using
2. Needing more and more each time
3. Losing interest in other activities in order to make room for the addiction
4. Finding others who share the same passion
5. Attempts to control the addiction fail
6. The drug begins to affect other areas of your life (social, emotional and spiritual)

Now that we have looked at how some research defines addiction, how do you know if your son or daughter may be addicted to on-line gaming or pornography?

According to the Center for On-Line Addiction, warning signs for video game addiction include:
- Playing for increasing amounts of time
- Thinking about gaming during other activities
- Gaming to escape from real-life problems, anxiety, or depression
- Lying to friends and family to conceal gaming
- Feeling irritable when trying to cut down on gaming

Some thoughts:
1. Find out what games your child/teen likes to play. Put them in a position of being an expert and have them explain what the goal is. Find out what the game is rated if you do not know. M rated games are for young people 17 years and older. T rated games vary like PG13 movies do. Make sure you understand the content of the game.
2. Keep a journal or log of time your teen spends in front of the screen. Most research recommends no more than 30-60 minutes a day. For those young people who are just beginning to game on computers, Xbox or Playstation, a time limit is highly recommended. It is more difficult to apply this time limit after someone has been gaming for 4-6 hours a day. Young people who are gamers object to this research. One of their arguments is that other teens may do sports, drama, play an instrument or play in a band and spend much more time at that than 30-60 minutes a day. For gamers who use their gaming as their social entertainment, there is some truth to their argument. If you decide to put limits on the time they spend gaming, be sure to document their response to the limits you set. Many of the gamers’ responses to this strategy may be negative but it might help them see how important gaming has become to them. I think the key here is to make sure that their pre-occupation with gaming does not interfere with other areas of their life.
3. Be aware of older siblings or neighbors turning their younger brothers and sisters on to a particular game. Many times a younger sibling is indoctrinated into a T or M game without their parent’s knowledge. Make sure that older brothers and sisters act as role models and are encouraged not to play inappropriate games in front of their younger siblings.
4. Understand that many of the on-line games want to keep your child/teen engaged. There is a monthly cost involved for many of these games. Their levels system is enormous and as soon as you beat the game more levels and characters are brought in. It really is a never ending cycle of excitement for the user.

Here are some warning signs for on-line pornography:
1. Your child is spending a large amount of time online.
2. Your child switches or minimizes the screen when you enter the room.
3. You find pornography of any kind saved on your child’s computer.
4. Your child receives phone calls, presents or packages from people you don’t know.
5. Your child possesses calling cards.
6. Your child becomes withdrawn from family and/or friends.
7. Your child begins to talk more openly about sex with friends and family

Some thoughts:
1. Have software on your computer that blocks inappropriate sites. Have an Internet Safety contract with your kids. Below is one example of an Internet Safety contract:
   - Let us know when something or someone makes you feel uncomfortable.
   - Let us know if someone is asking you for personal information.
   - We know there are times inappropriate messages or pictures will appear on the screen. Let us know when this happens as it happens to us as well.
   - Staying safe means keeping your password and buddy list (friends) to yourself.
• We have heard of young people who create websites about people they do not like. We know this is something you would not take part in. Let us know if you are being asked to take part in such a website, e-mail, text message, or instant message that includes putting someone down and disrespecting them. This type of message goes against our Code of Ethics. (Code of Ethics is based on your family’s beliefs, ideals and norms)

Please sign this agreement that states you will be a responsible internet user and will come to us with any of the issues or challenges stated above.
Source-Turn Up The Music by Jeff Dess
For more information visit www.missingkids.com or type internet safety contract into any search engine for more ideas.

3. Have an appropriate conversation about sex on the web- The media has lowered the bar in terms of exposure that our kids receive every day. You know your child best. Research says that talking to kids about sex openly and honestly is healthy. This conversation is dependant upon the age and emotionality of the child.

4. There is a difference between catching your child/teen with a picture of an adult nude on their screen as opposed to finding websites or chat rooms that they have visited that contain pornography. Cool heads need to prevail and a conversation needs to take place as to what your family’s code of ethics is and why it needs to be enforced.

Revisit the gaming signs and symptoms along with the definitions of addiction. If we look to the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable”, we see that we could put the word gaming or pornography in place of alcohol and realize that these young people and adults may need help in stopping. It becomes a family conversation.
Sources:
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