



## Computer/On-line Gaming Hobby or Addiction?

Many young people and adults spend a lot of time playing computer games, either on their own, or on line - MMORPGs (Massively multi-player on-line role-playing games). It can be a fun hobby, but it can also be addictive and impact the mental well-being of young people. The World Health Organisation will be recognising Gaming Addiction as a condition in their publication of International Classification of Diseases.

In order to help young people who have a gaming addiction, we have to look at why they become addicted.

### Why?

Studies have shown that the dopamine levels in the brain **double** when playing computer games. Dopamine is the chemical associated with pleasure.

What are the other reasons people become addicted? Imagine you are a young person who has low self-esteem and isn't comfortable socially, gaming can provide you with:

- ☞ escapism
- ☞ opportunity to be someone else
- ☞ friendships with people who won't judge you
- ☞ no judgement on your physical appearance
- ☞ a fresh start if things go wrong

Gaming can make young people feel they belong, and we all need to feel like we belong to something. So how do we know if gaming has become an addiction?

### Symptoms of gaming addiction

- ☞ preoccupation - talks about gaming constantly, seems irritable when away from the game

- ☞ lying - lies about how much time they are spending on the computer/games machine. playing in secret
- ☞ sacrificing time at work or school to play
- ☞ time slippage - unable to control how long they are playing. they may go on for 20 minutes but end up playing for a lot longer
- ☞ isolation - neglects other areas of life e.g. social interaction, school/college work, chores, personal hygiene, no other interests or hobbies
- ☞ escapism - they play when they want to escape uncomfortable feelings
- ☞ defensive - when challenged about the amount of time they spend on the computer they become defensive and aggressive
- ☞ denial - will say they are doing nothing different to their friends

There can also be physical consequences such as fatigue, migraines, sleeping problems, backache, poor eating habits and personal hygiene. Gaming addiction can also cause/worsen mental health conditions - depression, anxiety, OCD etc.

## Supporting

So how can we help our child manage their gaming. We have to look at what they get out of it and how can we help them gain those benefits elsewhere.

**Self-esteem** - low self-esteem will most likely be the underlying factor in gaming addiction. So we have to look at how we can improve their self-esteem. What do you do that boosts their self-esteem? What other activities do they do to boost their self-esteem. What can be done to improve their self-esteem? Remember, self-esteem is never boosted by negativity or criticism.

**Escapism** - is there something they are escaping from when gaming? If there is, what can you do about it? Is home life contributing. Is there a problem at home or school that needs addressing to support? It's important you don't presume you know what the problem is, provide an opportunity to discuss with your child and listen to what they say.

**Arrange other activities** - what else can they do? Help them arrange social activities or join a club. They will be nervous about this so do talk about what is making them nervous and how they can overcome this.

**Draw up a timetable** - gradually reduce gaming time with an agree timetable of when play will take place.

## What doesn't work...

As tempting as it is, a total ban will not work. We have to help them manage their addiction and find alternatives. Banning with nothing else to do will lead to boredom and conflict and possible exacerbate any mental health issue. We have to help them develop new habits that don't involve social isolation.