

Online Games: Game vs. Addiction

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Introduction

Playing games is a natural part of growing up. It's one way that kids learn to socialize and compete. Computer and online games, in most instances, are no more dangerous than other games that kids play. But sometimes, computer and online games become more than just play. They become an addiction. And when they become an addiction, your child's psychological and physical well-being may be in jeopardy.

Escaping into games

When your kids play games online, is it play? Or is it something darker? Addiction to computer and online games is a real and growing problem. It affects both kids and adults. Often the most addictive games are the online multi-player games. They include role-playing, endless levels of achievement, and an IM or chat function. Groups of players play and chat online, creating a fantasy world that provides an escape from real life. Kids can get caught up in this fantasy world to the exclusion of their real life responsibilities.

What gaming addiction looks like

Playing online or computer games is an innocent hobby that can become a pathological behavioral problem, in which playing games becomes more important than other aspects of life. Addicted kids spend hours on the computer to the exclusion of other activities. They lose interest in their school, fail to turn in homework assignments, and their grades suffer. They turn their backs on their friends, preferring to stay at home on the computer with their "online friends". Much of their conversation may revolve around the games they're playing. They may be inordinately proud of their gaming successes. If you challenge them about the time they spend at the computer, they try to hide their gaming activity. Physical warning signs include sleeplessness, dry eyes, and carpal tunnel injury. A recent study by [Harris Interactive](#) reports that nearly one in 10 kids between 8 and 18 are addicted to online gaming.† There are many reported cases of addiction to online gaming: teens who become reclusive; students whose grades drop precipitously; kids who drop out of high school to play games; kids who play games 60 or more hours each week; and more. This isn't, by the way, a problem that's exclusive to kids. Adults get caught up in it, too; turning their backs on their families, losing jobs, threatening their financial well-being, and losing spouses.

Other gaming dangers

Online gaming addiction opens kids up to other dangers, too. Chatting online with other game players may expose them to online predators. Predators go where kids go online, and where better than a fantasy world that includes children? Also, gaming addiction can take a toll on your pocketbook. Many popular online games require that players buy the game, then pay monthly subscription fees. Tools, accessories, and additional characters cost even more. It is possible to spend hundreds of dollars a month on monthly fees and add-ons. According to an article in [Bay Area Parent](#),†† a 14 year old boy used his mother's credit card to buy online a set of gaming accessories, including “magical dragon armor and 100 pieces of virtual gold.” His mother noticed unusual activity (amounting to \$600) on her statement and quickly figured out what had happened. One can buy additional characters and accessories from the gaming Web site and there are cyber shopping malls where one can pick up accessories like virtual Elvin bows, mystical armor or a sword of fire. One site listed a complete [World of Warcraft](#) character for sale at the extravagant beginning bid of \$1,600.

Finally, maintaining an open connection between your computer and a gaming Website/chat room, may lead to intrusion and possible [theft of your identity and financial records](#) on your home computer or network. It's always a good idea to have good Internet security software installed on your computer. It's even more important when your computer is used for online gaming.

Parenting is the best prevention

Good parenting goes a long way toward preventing addiction to online gaming. Make sure you know what games are installed on the computer your child uses. [Check browser history logs](#) to see where they've been on the Internet. Engage your children in regular conversations about their lives. Have dinner together every day. If they spend more than an hour a day in front of the computer, ask them what's going on. If their grades suffer or their friends stop calling, ask why. If you detect a problem or a behavioral change, address it immediately; don't let it slide. If you detect addiction, address it. Limit computer time. Put the computer in a public area of the home. If the problem persists, perhaps you should seek professional psychological help. A gaming addiction is very similar to other addictions, such as drugs, alcohol, or gambling. Helping a child beat the addiction may require expertise that a parent can't provide.

According to Dr. Douglas Gentile, Director of the Media Research Lab at [Iowa State University](#) and the director of research for the National Institute on Media and the Family, states, "It is important that people realize that playing a lot is not the same thing as pathological play. For something to be an addiction, it has to mean more than you do it a lot. It has to mean that you do it in such a way that it damages your life."††† In other words, many, if not most, kids who play online

games are just playing games. It's a healthy part of their life. If you see that game playing is becoming damaging to some aspect of their life, it's time to act.

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