

## Video Game Overuse May Be An Addiction

Millions of U.S. children and adults obsessed with video games may suffer from a real addiction, according to a proposal up for debate by top U.S. doctors.

Delegates attending the American Medical Association conference in Chicago, which starts Saturday, will discuss the proposed addition of video game addiction to a list of "formal disorders," where it would join other problem behaviors such as pathological gambling.

Dr. Martin Wasserman, executive director of MedChi, the Maryland State Medical Society, helped spearhead the new proposal, which has resulted in a 10-page report submitted to the AMA by the group's Council on Science and Public Health.

"The concern came up because one of our psychiatrists here in Maryland was seeing older people who were losing their social contacts," specifically because of their overuse of video games, Wasserman said. "It was ruining their family life. So, it was not unlike gambling addictions or alcohol, where it was having a profound impact on the lives of individuals."

According to the AMA report, one soon-to-be-released British study polled 7,000 "gamers" and found that 12 percent of them met World Health Organization criteria for addictive behaviors.

Statistics released in 2005 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), an industry group, estimated that 70 percent to 90 percent of American children play video games. The typical gamer is a 30-year-old male who spends about seven or eight hours a week gaming.

The ESA survey also found that video game overuse was most prevalent among the approximately 9 percent of video game users who play against others online in Internet-based "massive multiplayer online role playing games."

The new AMA report defines "heavy game use" as two or more hours a day, but Wasserman, a pediatrician, said addictions are best defined by their impact on an individual's life and psyche.

"Basically, you're using a disproportionate amount of time on the video game, and it's what you are thinking about even when you're *not* on the video game," he said. "And even though it's having negative consequences for you in school or your family situation, or it's taking a disproportionate amount of your money, you still continue to do it. You spend less time with your friends or in other social things."

One theory why certain individuals spend so much time on online games is that they prefer the experience to real-world interaction. According to the report's authors, the "current theory is that these individuals achieve more control of their social relationships and more success in social relationships in the virtual reality realm than in real relationships."

But that sense of control may come at a price, Wasserman said, especially for children and adults obsessed with games loaded with violent imagery.

"The violent aspects of this, in particular, have got to be a threat to the normal growth and development that we'd like to see in young people," he said. "People have observed more aggressive behaviors [linked to gaming], and if you do subjective testing, there are studies which have shown aggressive behaviors in young people and less supportive behaviors."

Wasserman wonders, as well, about the sedentary aspects of hours of video game use. "I can't tell you if this is associated with our current epidemic of child obesity," he said, "but too much time in front of a video tube -- and much of that time spent watching violent interactions -- can't be good for our kids."

That's a sentiment shared by a majority of the American public, according to a survey of more than 1,000 parents of children aged 2 to 17 that was released Tuesday by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation. According to the *Associated Press*, two-thirds of parents responding to the survey said they were "very concerned" about the amount of sex and violence their children are exposed to in various media.

But the AMA report remains merely a starting point for discussion among doctors gathering in Chicago. It is far from certain that the physicians' group will, in fact, move to label excessive gaming an addiction.

The report's authors are urging that the AMA pressure the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to include "Internet/video game addiction" in the next edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the standard diagnostic text used by psychiatrists worldwide.

But Dr. James Scully, medical director at the APA, said any decision on the matter is a long way off.

Right now, "we don't agree or disagree" with the idea, he said. "As a diagnostic issue, it is going to be several years before we make a determination of that. It's clearly something that we want to consider."

In the meantime, he said, it's up to parents to limit their child's exposure to video games, especially the more violent ones. Both the AMA and the APA support current recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics that limit children's exposure to all "screen time" -- TV, computers and video games -- to a total of two hours a day.

Wasserman believes this simple rule can minimize media's potentially harmful effects. Media, in itself, isn't always bad, he said, but "everything needs to be done in moderation."

"That's what we taught our kids -- if they didn't do it in moderation in our home, we moderated it for them," he said. "It didn't hurt them."

Credit – EJ Mandell, Healthday Reporter