# Danger: 'screenager' ahead…

*Computer game addiction is on the rise among Australian children and teenagers, replete with a host of alarming consequences, writes Karen Fontaine*

As with most sedentary activities, at first blush it seems harmless enough. Playing computer games is, after all, much less dangerous – physically, at least – than rugby union, rock-climbing or rollerblading, right?

However, experts are seeing a rise in the incidence of what they term obsessive or addictive behaviour; that is, pervasive, long-term and heavy use of computer games.

A 2010 study by Sydney University's Professor Vladan Starcevic and the department of Psychological Medicine at Sydney's Nepean hospital revealed that up to ten per cent of gamers who took part showed signs of addicted behaviour. His findings were published in The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry.

The findings mirror a recent two-year Singapore study, which found that one in ten schoolchildren were computer game addicts.

Victoria University researcher Daniel Loton, who is writing his PhD on the topic of computer game addiction, says although video gaming as a hobby is most prevalent in 25 to 30 year-olds, "it is still extremely popular among teens and children".

Potent, too, are the knock-on effects of addiction, including a propensity to cyber-bully, reduced social skills and an inability to interact in a 'live' situation. Teenagers addicted to computer games can also become withdrawn, depressed, agitated, have difficulty concentrating and poor attention spans.



"Many studies have found connections with declined mental, physical and social wellbeing, including increased psychopathology, depression, anxiety and stress," Loton says. "Other studies have found associations with poorer school performance and it is expected a component of video game addiction, like other addictive conditions, is the difficulty in meeting expected responsibilities."

Loton points out that studies suggest children and teens at risk of becoming addicted to computer games already show higher impulsivity,

aggression, lower family closeness and social competence before they become addicted, and they demonstrate declined mental health and school performance as a direct consequence of their addiction.

In the UK, the situation is so critical that computer game addiction has given rise to the establishment of a special 'technology addiction unit' at a private hospital. And although Sydney's Rivendell Adolescent Unit at Concord has treated computer-game-addicted teens, the Australian Medical Association, as yet, has no policy in place to address the problem. One of Australia's foremost experts on computer game addiction, child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Philip Tam, wrote in a blog: "Since clients with more severe PIU (problematic internet use) are at risk of dropping out of school, affecting their physical health, or losing their job, it would be unethical not to address their problems in a professional manner. In my personal experience, the key to successful treatment is getting the client to fully recognise that they have a problem – what we term 'gaining insight'."

## How to recognise it

**Daniel Loton signposts the warning signals of computer game addiction:**

▸ **Tolerance** – the need to play increasing amounts to get the same level of enjoyment
▸ **Withdrawal** – negative emotions if play is reduced or stopped
▸ **Salience** – video gaming dominating the person's thought;
▸ **Mood modification** – using video games to modify mood, either to relax or to become excited
▸ **Conflict** – conflict about gaming both within the person and with other people
▸ **Relapse** – repeated failures to cut back or stop gaming, despite the desire to.

## What to do

Short of banning computer games, what can concerned parents do? In today's digital world, keeping kids away from computers is about as realistic as wrapping them in cotton wool. As such, Daniel Loton advises parents to:

▸ "Talk to your children about the role that video games have in their lives"
▸ "Try to develop a bit of an interest in the video games that your children play"
▸ "Share the activity with them, making it a family activity for at least some of the time"
▸ "Finally, if you believe there is a serious problem, seek help from your GP and/or a mental health professional."

Loton notes these recommendations are subjective and it depends on how the activity fits in with other aspects of life. "In all addictions, overall time spent on the activity is only a small component," he says. "Instead it is more important how that time is spent – that is, if a person chooses to play video games instead of going to work; as well as perceived dependence."

*Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based freelance journalist.*