

SHRINK RAP - High Tech Rehab

By Jan Hittelman

The Camera, January 2008

An increasing concern for parents is the amount of time their children are spending recreationally on the computer and/or playing video games. The challenge for parents is determining what's appropriate and how much is too much.

As more people engage in high tech recreation, there are increasing concerns regarding the effects of these activities and the potential harm of excessive computer and video game use. In 2007 both the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry recommended a careful review of related research and the consideration of defining excessive computer and video gaming as an addiction. As with other potentially harmful behaviors, certain symptoms must be considered before making the diagnosis of "addiction." These include: the amount of time that is dedicated to the behavior, the degree to which the behavior interferes with healthy daily functioning, and any resulting detrimental physiological or behavioral effects.

Time dedicated to computer and video game use: While not necessarily research-based, many experts recommend limiting use to two hours a day. A more practical time guideline would be based on the individual and the impact of use on daily functioning.

Impact on healthy daily functioning: Excessive use is more of a concern if it negatively interferes with school performance, peer socialization, family interaction, exercise/weight control, and interest in other activities.

Physiological Effects: While more research is needed, there have been studies that report negative physiological effects. These include: light-induced seizures, sleep disturbances, back and neck pain, headaches, dry eyes and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Behavioral Effects: There are numerous studies that show a correlation between exposure to violent video games and aggressive thoughts or behavior. None of these studies, however, can demonstrate long-term impacts or conclude that video gaming itself causes aggressive behavior.

What's a parent to do? The first step is to have an open discussion with your children regarding computer and video game use. If your child has a healthy social life and continues to function well at home and in school, simply monitoring use may be sufficient. If the amount of daily use time is excessive and/or you have concerns about your child's social, emotional or behavioral health, try setting clear guidelines. In addition, consider gaming and recreational computer time as a reward for completing homework, household chores, or engaging in prosocial activities. Help your child replace use time with other fun activities. Simply taking away the activity and leaving a vacuum, will likely lead to conflict and efforts to "get around" newly imposed rules.

It is also important to understand that addictive behaviors are usually symptoms of underlying emotional challenges (e.g. depression, anxiety, social adjustment, etc.). Addressing the surface behaviors without treating these issues will only result in a reoccurrence of the undesired behaviors and/or new ones taking their place. If you have concerns about your child, consider an assessment by a mental health professional to determine the extent of the problem and better understand the underlying issues that may be fueling the behavior.

Dr. Jan Hittelman is a licensed psychologist and Director of Boulder Psychological Services, LLC. What's your opinion? Questions or comments for this monthly column can be sent to: 1527 Pine Street, Suite B, Boulder, CO 80302, via email to: jan.hittelman@gmail.com, or by phone: 720-217-3270