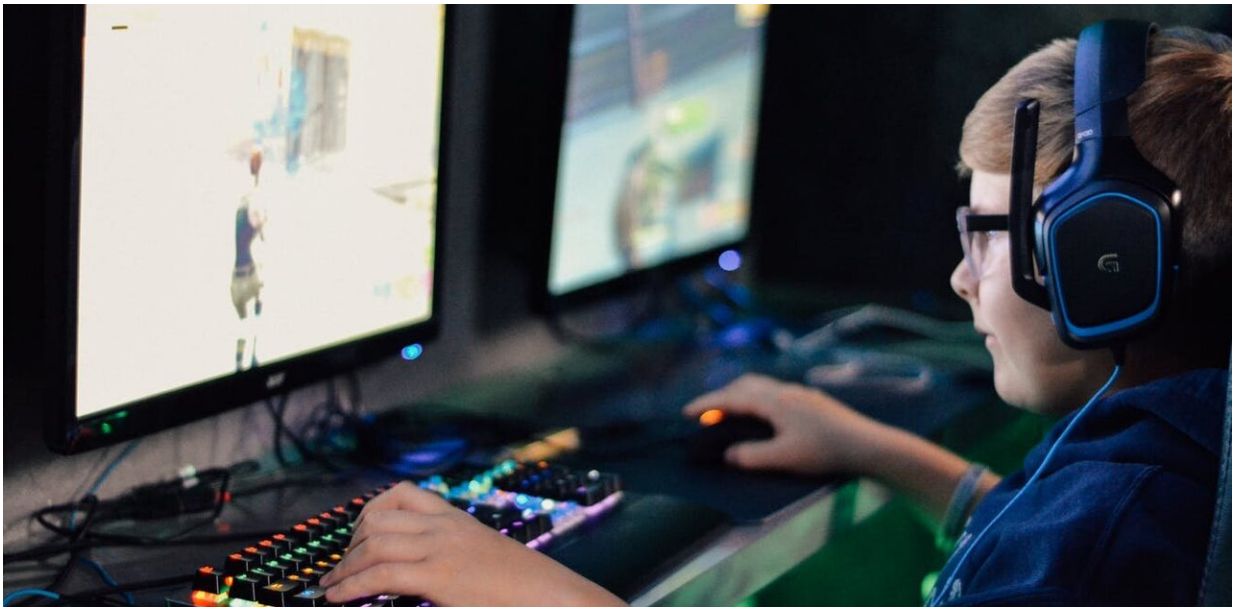


How to know if your child is addicted to video games and what to do about it

June 5 2019, by Joanne Orlando



When gaming interferes with a person's daily life, it might become a disorder.
Credit: Alex Haney

If your child spends long hours playing video games, you might be worried they're addicted.

"Gaming disorder" is real, and has now been classified as a disease in the World Health Organisation's [International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems](#) (ICD). The new ICD will be adopted in 2022.

If you are worried about your child's gaming, this new classification will help you identify whether they have a problem and if you need professional help.

Gaming disorder is not just for kids—it can be experienced by gamers of all ages: children, teenagers and adults.

The condition isn't defined by gaming too much, or the number of hours played, but rather it's when gaming interferes with a person's daily life.

To be diagnosed, a person will demonstrate all three of the following symptoms for at least 12 months:

- losing control over gaming
- prioritising gaming to the extent that it takes precedence over other activities and interests
- continuing to [game](#) despite negative effects on work, school, [family life](#), health, hygiene, relationships, finances or social relationships.

The classified disorder focuses on gaming only, it doesn't include other digital behaviours such as overuse of the internet, online gambling, social media, or smart phones.

It also relates to gaming on any device, although [most people who develop clinically significant gaming problems](#) play primarily on the internet.

Serious health condition

While millions of kids and adults around the world play video games, only a small number are expected to meet the WHO criteria.

Like other diagnosable addictions, gaming disorder is an extreme mental health condition expected to affect only 0.003 to 1% of the population who engage in video-gaming activities [www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/internet-gaming].

This small percentage still however incorporates a lot of people. Drawing from a random sample of 1,234 people of all ages, around [67% of Australians play video games](#). This would mean that around 5,000-16,500 Aussies could potentially be diagnosed with the disorder.

Not everyone agrees this is a disorder

While it feels like this classification is a *fait accompli*, the designation of gaming disorder as an addiction remains hotly debated.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is still not convinced. Two things are holding it back.

The first is that problem gaming often occurs alongside other factors [such as loneliness](#), or [mental health conditions](#) such as anxiety and depression. The APA argues problematic gaming may be a symptom of these, rather than a unique condition in its own right.

The second issue for the APA is the lack of [strong evidence and research](#) to support gaming disorder as an addiction in its own right.

Other experts have also [weighed into this debate](#) suggesting the classification is simply a response to the huge community concern and moral panic about video games.

How gaming disorder should be treated

An important impact of the classification of gaming disorder as an addiction is it lays the path for treatment by health professionals.

But like the classification of the disorder, research-based treatment plans are also in their infancy.

A [survey of psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand](#) found only 16.3% felt confident managing the disorder.

So what should you expect from professional treatment?

There are two common forms of treatment: one focuses on understanding the gamer's situation; the other focuses on learning new behaviours.

Treatment often [includes therapy sessions](#) with an addiction counsellor. The sessions may take the form of individual sessions, group sessions and/or family sessions. Each session dynamic has a different focus. For example, family therapy sessions focus on exploring and addressing issues in the patient's family that may contribute to the [addiction](#).

The second common treatment is [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT). This often takes place in addition to counselling sessions. CBT is based on the premise that thoughts determine feelings and it is used to treat many psychiatric [disorders](#), such as [substance use disorders](#), depression and anxiety. CBT teaches the gamer different ways to think, behave, and [respond](#) to stressful situations.

Other medical treatments proving to have some success include art therapy and exercise therapy.

[Research](#) on suitable medication is also continuing.

Treatment plans are designed according to the needs of the individual. It may involve a series of CBT sessions, for example, plus individual therapy sessions, plus family therapy sessions. Treatment is tailored to the age of the person, their faith, their professional status or other factor important to their treatment.

At this stage, no [treatment](#) can claim a 100% success rate and this is reflective of the need for more [research](#).

Tips to manage your child's gaming

While most gamers will not be diagnosed with gaming disorder, a child's gaming habits can cause significant distress for parents. They may be concerned their child is spending too much time on video games, that they resist every time they are asked to get off, or that gaming is leading to an unhealthy or unbalanced lifestyle.

Here are some tips for supporting more healthy approaches to gaming for children include:

- encourage sport and physical activity. This can increase blood levels of serotonin and have a positive effect on mood and symptoms of problematic gaming
- talk to your child about what they enjoy about gaming and why they want to game regularly. Their answer will help you identify if there are others issues they may be experiencing and using gaming as an escape
- when you call your child off their game, ensure they have an activity to shift to, such as a family outing or dinner. This will create a reason to get off
- when calling your child off a game, give them time to finish the game. Continuously being asked to get off mid-game can be frustrating and lead to arguments. Ask them how much longer

they will need to finish the game and then ensure they get off when the game is over.

With video games such a significant aspect of young people's lives, it's important to guide healthy, balanced approaches as young as possible.

Central to this is ensuring you include gaming and any other technology activities in family discussions. This will help keep the lines of communication open and will help identify any problem behaviour early on.

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