

# childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

We have helped over 6100 children!

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Online gaming addiction

Depression in adolescents

See us in...  
Springfield,  
Ipswich and  
Toowoomba



## Special points of interest:

- At *childpsych* psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists are involved in the child's assessment
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## Online gaming addiction

Online gaming is an integral part of most children and adolescents. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reports that 25% of computer and video game players are under the age of 18, with 60% being male. The ESA also reports that 17% of parents do not impose time limits on their children. 61% of online game users spent over 10 hours.

Research does suggest that in extreme cases of excessive online gaming, symptoms seen in other addictions are observed. More specifically, craving for more gaming and altered mood have been observed. It is important to note that it is not the amount of time spent in gaming as it is the difficulty with resisting the urge to play.

So how does an adolescent or child become "addicted" to online gaming? Well this is a challenging question as it is likely that a variety of factors such as genetics, beliefs and attitudes, and the environment bring about addiction.

Nonetheless, we do know that children and adolescents with poor emotional coping skills turn to gaming to regulate themselves. In other words, it seems that children and adolescents who have a poor ability to cope with stress turn to "escapism". This is a catch 22 as increased gaming use actually hinders the young person from the opportunity to learn better stress coping skills.

So what sort of person is likely to become "addicted" to gaming. Some research has suggested that young people with obsessive type personalities are more likely to cope with



**A recent study examined the brain functioning of adolescent online gaming addicts found that poor frontal lobe functioning was present.**

stress by forming a strong association with online gaming. This makes sense, as other research has suggested that online gaming is a difficulty with controlling impulses or urges.

Certainly in our practice adolescents we see who are involved in excessive online gaming, tend to have depression or social anxiety. In other words, their excessive gaming is a coping strategy for an underlying mental health problem.

Other studies have shown that the typical excessive online gamer is male, single, has time to game, more likely to be neurotic/half-glass empty, is more interested in online gaming relationships than real ones, engages in suicidal thoughts. More worrying is that excessive online gaming is associated with substance abuse and online gambling.

So what keeps an online gaming addict "hooked". Well aside from it being a source of escapism, it appears online gaming addicts are intrinsically motivated compared to non-addicts. Intrinsic motivation factors could be a sense of belonging, personal satisfaction and achievement. Extrinsic motivation factors could be praise from others, accolades from peers and so on. Non-addicts tend to play games for ex-

trinsic reasons.

It certainly seems then that those young people who are rejected by their peers, may be depressed or anxious, or have trouble finding meaning in their life, may well find escapism and even friendship with online peers and through online games. It is important to understand that research is still determining if depressed mood leads to online gaming addiction or whether excessive online gaming causes poor mood. Either way something is wrong when a young person games excessively.

But not everyone who is unhappy turns to online gaming I hear you say. All good psychologists would agree that our biology predisposes us to addictive behaviours. You may recall earlier in this article we alluded to "obsessive" personalities. A recent study examined the brain functioning of adolescent online gaming addicts found that poor frontal lobe functioning was present. The frontal lobe is involved in regulating impulses and managing attention.

The treatment of online gaming addiction is still developing. It follows that it is important for the psychologist to determine if the gaming addiction at least started as a coping mechanism for an underlying mental health disorder. This means that an effective treatment plan needs to address the underlying mental health disorder also. However, it is possible that depending how long the gaming addiction has been going on for, it may require separate treatment.

As always, if you are concerned, then seek the opinion of a psychologist.

## Depression in adolescents

Depression affects about 8% of adolescents in any given year with some experts predicting that only 20% of depressed adolescents ever receive professional help.



### Causes of Depression

There are several possible causes of depression. Biologically, some individuals are predisposed to developing depression. For example, research on infants of mothers with depression has shown that the infants have less left frontal lobe activity than infants of mothers who do not have depression. The frontal lobe is involved in the regulation of attention and emotion among other things. It is no surprise then that children with AD/HD, which in many cases is a disorder of the frontal lobe, often have problems with managing their emotions and are at increased risk of depression.

Psychological explanations of depression tend to focus on how the individual tends to perceive the world. For example, depressed individuals have been found to have more negative thoughts about themselves, the world and their future. A tendency to blame oneself and to ruminate (continually mull over things) are just two of the faulty thinking styles seen in depressed individuals.

Environmental explanations of depression focus on such things as poor relationships with family and peers. In addition, a lack of social support or good quality friendships also increase the risk of depression in vulnerable individuals.

### Signs of Depression in an Adolescent

Depression in adolescents can be challenging to diagnose. For example, excessive sleeping and moodiness are typical symptoms of depression, yet these are also typical of the developing adolescent. However, continued irritability or angry mood, instead of outward sadness, is one sign in depressed adolescents. In addition, depressed adolescents frequently complain about physical ailments such as stomach aches and headaches. Likewise, the depressed adolescent will withdraw from some people but not all. Such adolescents may also begin to spend time with a completely different social group and leave all their friends. In addition, the depressed adolescent is often very sensitive to criticism because of their poor self esteem. It is important to note that these represent a change in the adolescent's normal

behaviour. A withdrawal from people and a tendency not to find life as pleasurable are also defining features of depression.

Untreated depression can lead to problems with academic grades, running away, refusing to attend school, reckless behaviour, drug use and self injury to name a few.

It is also important to know that up to 80% of depressed adolescents will also be diagnosed with another mental health condition. An anxiety disorder such as Social Phobia is often present in the young person.

### How to Help the Adolescent

If you suspect an adolescent of being depressed, there are a few things you can do. Talk gently to the adolescent and let them know you care and will help in any way. Be gentle, but persistent - keep trying to talk to them even if they don't want to talk to you at first. Validate their feelings and their reasons (no matter how trivial they may seem). Make sure you listen and DO NOT lecture them. Encourage them to seek help. If your adolescent denies being depressed but your "gut" instinct says something is wrong, then trust this feeling and seek the advice of your family doctor or a psychologist.

### Treatment

Treatment of adolescent depression can involve medication and/or non-medical approaches. There has been some controversy over the use of medication to treat depression in adolescents. Some researchers argue that the use of antidepressant medication on the developing adolescent brain can be dangerous. However, in some cases antidepressant medication is necessary because of the severity of the depression and/or poor response to psychological counselling.

Psychological counselling, in particular Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy have been shown to be effective for most adolescents with depression. These approaches work on changing the way the adolescent thinks about things as well as improving their social environment.



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### How long does it take?

The cogmed program consists of 25 training sessions of 30-40 minutes each, done over 5 weeks. It is the intensity of this training schedule that is critical to the program's success. The user/family sets the training schedule with the Cogmed Coach, with plenty of flexibility.

## Autism Services

childpsych provides a specialist autism clinic focused on assessment and diagnosis and intervention services. Our autism interventions are delivered by psychologists accredited to work with children with autism spectrum disorders.

- ✓ Assessment and diagnosis of autism
- ✓ Management of children with autism to age 18 years
- ✓ Behavioural interventions, social skills, transition to school, treatment of other conditions such as anxiety, depression
- ✓ Special education development classes and remedial teaching classes

[childpsych.net.au/autism-services.php](http://childpsych.net.au/autism-services.php)

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