

Gaming addiction on the rise among children amid pandemic: Counsellors

Osmond Chia and Shermaine Ang

SINGAPORE - Cooped up at home during the circuit breaker in 2020, his teenage daughter found a new way to pass the time with the help of video games.

Mr Lim Cheng Mong was concerned about the long hours the 18-year-old spent gaming, which he estimated to be six hours a day.

But the father of two struggled to lay down any rules over computer usage, as he knew his children also needed the devices for schoolwork and projects.

"As a parent, I can't stop my children from accessing the computer since they also have projects to complete," said Mr Lim, 56, a product manager. "It's harder for us to control their timing now without being too intrusive."

He is not the only one facing such a problem. The Ministry of Education (MOE) said it has observed more students who have been counselled for gaming issues in recent years, with the increased access to technology and online games.

This may have worsened during the pandemic when more time is spent online, the ministry added. It did not give figures on the trend.

MOE said students who struggle with excessive online gaming may feel restless and irritable when they are unable to game, and often do not get enough sleep due to the strong urge to spend more time gaming.

"In extreme cases, excessive online gaming can disrupt their lives as they replace daily activities with online gaming, and can put a strain on their relationships with family and friends," said MOE.

Since the start of this year, upper secondary students have been taught a new character and citizenship education curriculum tackling cyber-risks such as inappropriate websites, gaming and social media addiction.

Counsellors, too, said they have seen a stark increase in reports from parents about their children being hooked on online gaming since the pandemic hit.

Most of the seven counselling agencies interviewed by The Straits Times cited the 2020 circuit breaker as a catalyst for addiction in many children, with the number of cases rising by up to 60 per cent.

Touch Youth Intervention (TYI), a non-profit agency providing counselling and intervention services for youth, said it received 1,004 calls last year regarding youngsters facing issues with excessive device use, including being addicted to gaming.

Senior counsellor and head of TYI, Mr Shawn Soh, said that before Covid-19, the agency dealt with some 500 such cases each year.

While the time spent online can vary for each person, it becomes a problem when gaming eats away at a child's other responsibilities like doing homework, health and family time, he added.

He cited free multiplayer games like Minecraft, Mobile Legends and Fortnite as gateways into online gaming among many of the children he saw.

Mr Soh, 33, added that at least two in three of the children referred to TYI behaved aggressively when confronted by their parents, throwing tantrums, shouting or hitting others.

"Covid-19 has definitely created more chaos at home as many kids are facing screens all day. Over time, this became the norm," he said.

On Jan 24, a 14-year-old boy who had a gaming addiction was [sentenced to five years' detention for killing his father at their Loyang condominium](#), after the latter restricted his access to computer games.

The court heard that the boy grew resentful and stabbed his father with a knife in December 2020. The boy had autism, but his counsellors reported that this did not contribute to his offence.

Clinical psychologist Caroline Balhetchet estimated that six in 10 children today show signs of gaming addiction, compared with four in 10 before the pandemic.

Dr Balhetchet, who works with troubled youth in her private practice, said: "During the pandemic, kids are isolated at home and spend a lot more time online. For some, games are their only source of stimulation and gratification. Every time you reach a level above others, you feel accomplished and you can't stop."

"When you take simulation out while a child is in the process of receiving it, they may retaliate as they are unable to control their impulses," she added, recounting a case she handled of a boy who punched his father when the parent pulled the plug on the computer, and another boy who grabbed his mother's arm and left bruises on her when she tried to confiscate his gaming mouse.

We Care Community Services counsellor Alvin Seng, 34, said that since the pandemic, online addiction has become the biggest issue among young people at the addiction recovery centre. The centre handled more than 40 cases of online addiction last year, up from fewer than 30 per year before the pandemic.

He added that children hooked on gaming may be exposed to other addictions like gambling, citing [gambling-like mechanics in popular online games like Genshin Impact](#), where players can try their luck and buy randomised items to upgrade their avatars.

Promises Healthcare addictions therapist Juliana Pang said gaming addictions often develop in the context of underlying issues, such as struggles with schoolwork, bullying, or tensions at home. Children hence turn to gaming as a coping mechanism, she added.

"We often advocate connection before correction," she said. "Family members connecting with the child, and understanding why and how they game, will go a long way towards supporting their recovery."

Parents should also manage their child's screen time, she added, as children who game for long hours may be more likely to respond rashly to interruptions, as gaming keeps their minds in a constant state of hyper-arousal.

"This affects children and teens more as their brains are still developing, including the areas that focus on rational thinking, pausing and self-reflection," she said.

To help a child addicted to gaming, counsellor Oh Chee Siong, 38, of LoveTalks Counselling, said parents need patience to build trust with their children, and advised them to recommend new hobbies for them besides gaming.

Mr Oh said: "The parents' job is not to challenge the kid but to understand what is so good about gaming and encourage them to try other similar things. It can take many steps but you can't expect magic to happen at once."