

Children addicted to video games are attacking families

Eleanor Hayward Health Correspondent

Hundreds of children are undergoing NHS treatment after becoming addicted to video games, causing some to violently attack their own families.

The first NHS centre for gaming disorders has treated 745 patients since it opened in October 2019, including 327 people last year, most of them teenage boys. Police are “regularly” being called to family homes because children are becoming aggressive when desperate parents attempt to restrict their internet access or hide games consoles.

Some problem gamers end up suicidal, telling doctors that they would “rather be dead than not game”. Others drop out of school, skip meals and even family holidays so they can play all day.

The figures, obtained by The Times, reveal for the first time the increasing impact of such addiction on the NHS and families, a problem exacerbated by lockdown when children “took refuge in online friendships”.

Professor Henrietta Bowden-Jones, founder and director of the NHS gaming disorders centre, said teachers and GPs should be trained to spot signs of gaming addiction and refer children for specialist help.

Bowden-Jones, a consultant psychiatrist, urged ministers to ban under-18s from in-game spending, warning that some stole their parents’ credit cards to purchase rewards such as “loot boxes”.

She added that gaming companies should implement mechanisms so that people could limit how long they spent playing, and that the NHS logo should be displayed on all games so children knew help was available.

Gaming disorder was classified as a mental health condition by the World Health Organisation in 2018. Symptoms include a lack of control and gaming “taking precedence over other interests and daily activities” for at least

Continued on page 2
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Video game addiction

a year. The NHS clinic has recorded 68 games used by children with the disorder, including popular products such as *Minecraft*, *Fortnite*, *Fifa* and *Call of Duty*.

The NHS opened its clinic in 2019. Based in Earls Court, southwest London, it offers online therapy to patients across England. The average age of gamers referred for help is 17, and they usually receive 12 sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy.

Children are encouraged to rediscover other interests and re-engage with schoolwork, with the goal of restricting gaming to two hours a day, down from up to 14 hours. Parents are also offered therapy and support groups.

Of the 327 people treated at the clinic last year, 150 were gamers and 177 were

family members, up from 99 gamers and 121 family members in 2021. Bowden-Jones said: “By the time they see us, parents have tried everything. Their immediate response is to take everything away — the gaming console, the laptop, the phone — which leads to aggression and violence, both in terms of the child to the parents and the child to siblings. Once violence takes place, it’s a traumatised family.”

She is “no longer surprised by police involvement”, with some parents being assaulted by their children. “Sometimes, out of frustration, the child is self-harming,” she said. “I have seen a couple of children try to strangle themselves with their own hands, saying they’d rather be dead than not game. These children are gaming 12-14 hours a day. The police are getting called out regularly to these homes.”

One mother, Lisa, sought help from the clinic last year after her 14-year-old son became “very aggressive” when he became addicted to gaming. She said: “He would get very angry with the person he was gaming against online. He’d come off the game, but still be really wound up, and we were in the ricochet. He wouldn’t eat meals with us because he’d be too busy on the game. We tried everything — putting restrictions on the wifi or taking away devices — but nothing worked.” Lisa, from the Midlands, attended group parent therapy sessions with a psychologist, learning “invaluable” strategies that have reduced the time her son spends gaming.

Latest data from the UK Safer Internet Centre shows that 77 per cent of 8 to 17-year-olds play games online at least once a week. A report by Ofcom last year found that 31 per cent of young

gamers played against strangers or people they had not met in person.