What is Problematic Internet Use?

"The Internet appears to be capable of altering the mood, motivation, concentration, and producing a dissociating and disinhibiting experience for users; for some individuals, patterns of use can transform to abuse, taking on a compulsive quality. ....Many of the *daily spheres of behaviour, including work, appear to be effected by* this powerful technology." Dr David Greenfield, Centre for Internet Behaviour USA.

Problematic Internet addiction or excessive Internet use is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviours regarding computer use and Internet access that lead to impairment or distress. The problem of excessive Internet use is something that is more common in adolescent males than females and nearly always linked to online gaming sites. In severe cases, the gaming takes over the person's life to the exclusion of all else.

Whilst 'Internet Addiction' is not currently included in DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Edition IV) it appears to be a common disorder that warrants inclusion on DSM V. What this means is that currently, as the disorder is not recognised, it cannot be 'diagnosed'. This can pose a problem for patients trying to access medical treatment rebates. It is of course a well-documented problem around the world, often with tragic consequences. In Asia for example, there have been many deaths attributed to the continual and excessive playing of online games.

Computer games are very different to what you as parents may remember when a 'disc' was inserted into a computer and you played with no more interaction than the screen. Computer games now involve connecting to the Internet (Online) and the player is interacting with other 'gamers' around the world. This can also be a concern when young children connect with people that they do not know. (See Online Grooming fact sheet)

Risk Factors

- *You suffer from anxiety*
- *You suffer from depression or are depressed*
- *You have been diagnosed with an ADHD type illness*
- *You have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome*
- *You lack social support*
- *You are an 'unhappy' teenager*
- *You are bored*
- *You are less mobile (you have a physical disability)*
- *You are lonely and have few friends in the 'real' world*
- *You are stressed (you use games as an escape from your problems)*
- *Anomie (a lack of social norms; "normlessness". It describes the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and their community).*

Signs

- *Loosing track of time online*
- *Having trouble completing tasks on time (homework / chores)*
- *Isolation from family and friends (replacing real friends for only online friends or other gamers)*
- *Feeling guilty or defensive about the time you spend online - "I don't have a problem, you are the one with the problem"*
- *Feeling only happy when in the 'gaming' environment.*
- *Withdrawal from daily activities (school refusal / withdrawing from sport teams)*

Physical Symptoms can include:-*Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (pain and numbness in hands and wrists), dry eyes or strained vision, back aches and neck aches, severe headaches, sleep disturbances, pronounced weight gain or weight loss*

What can you do?

Acknowledging that your child has a problem around their use of online games can be very confusing. It often moves from a manageable stage to one that appears hopeless. Making sure that from the very first game your child plays online you play too. You need to see the content of the game to ensure suitability and also to understand the way the game works. Make sure the content is age and developmentally suitable for your child. The fact that others in your child's grade play the game is *not* a good guide as to its suitability for your child. Check not only the 'rating' of the game, view the content as well. World of Warcraft or WOW for short, is noted by researchers and practitioners around the world as the most psychologically damaging and addictive game on the Internet. Set very clear rules about your child's online gaming and have strict time limits. If you see you're child continually trying to push the boundaries, staying online for longer than allowed or logging on when you are out or asleep, then do not ignore these signs. There are four defined levels of Pathological Internet Use or PIU and corresponding treatment options: -

Level 1 – Mild impact / early problems
Treatment - in house efforts, family support, self-help
Level 2 – Increased impact /social circle notices (school, peers)
Treatment - Associates, school counsellor
Level 3 - Clinical impact, specific interventions indicated
Treatment - Clinical Psychologist
Level 4 - Addiction or PIU, major or whole social role impacted (takes over their life to the exclusion of all else)
Treatment - Psychiatric / inpatient plus medication considerations

For further information please visit NIIRA.org.au which, is the only organization in Australia devoted to the issue of Problematic Internet Use (Internet Addiction). You can download a self-assessment tool called i.m.p.r.o.v.e. that will help you to identify the level of problem you may be experiencing within your family.