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Internet addiction a real problem for U.S. kids

Addictions to alcohol, gambling and drugs have been recognized as dangers for years. But addiction to the Internet?

Experts say it's a real problem that affects about 8%-12% of U.S. children.

Internet addiction is characterized by a child's strong desire to be online,

and the desire gets in the way of activities like spending time with friends and family, sleeping and doing schoolwork.

Parents should focus on preventing this addictive behavior in their youngsters before it becomes a problem. But this is easier said than done.

"If the Internet were all bad, we could treat this like smoking or drug use and just say don't do it," said Dimitri Christakis, M.D., FAAP, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee. "The challenge is for parents to find a way to actually mediate the usage so children get the good aspects of it without the bad."

Dr. Christakis offered the following advice to parents:

- Limit the amount of time children can spend online.
- Differentiate between use that is school-related vs.



purely entertainment based.

- Do not put a computer in your child's room. Instead, computers should be in an area of the home where you can easily monitor what your child is doing online.
- Find out what your child likes to do online. Certain reality-based games like World of Warcraft are particularly addictive because they draw you into what Dr. Christakis describes as "a second life."
- Certain children are at higher risk for Internet addiction, such as children with attention problems, depression, anxiety and social isolation. Monitor these children more carefully.

If your child's Internet use is compulsive, interferes with daily activity, and restrictions cause mood swings or agitation, seek professional help. There are treatment centers around the country that help those who suffer from internet addiction.

— Heather Waldron