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Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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Video Games and the Depressed Teenager

By [RONI CARYN RABIN](#)

Jae C. Hong/Associated Press Can too many video games make your teenager depressed? There's been a lot of buzz about whether video games are habit-forming, and whether parents are exaggerating when they say their teenagers are "addicted" to game playing. Now new research on children who are heavy gamers suggests parents may have something else to worry about: depression.

Two recent studies of gamers are among the first to follow large groups of teenagers over time to assess their mental health and how much time they spend playing video games. Their gaming habits were assessed at the start of the study period, and the researchers then followed them for a year or two to see how they were faring.

The results are discouraging. The [latest study, published Monday in the journal Pediatrics](#), followed 3,000 students in the third, fourth, seventh and eighth grades in Singapore. Children who were more impulsive and less comfortable with other children spent more time playing video games, the study found. Two years later, these heavy gamers, who played an average of 31 hours a week, compared with 19 hours a week for other students, were more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and social phobias. They were also more likely to see their grades in school drop and have worse relationships with their parents.

The findings come on the heels of another study, released last fall, that followed more than 1,000 healthy Chinese teenagers ages 13 to 18. Those who used the Internet excessively were more than twice as likely as the others to be depressed nine months later; most of the Internet use was for video games, the researchers said. That [study was published in The Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine](#).

Even before the latest study was released, officials with the Entertainment Software Association, which represents companies that sell interactive video games, attacked it. They noted that there is no clear consensus on what defines “pathological gaming” or agreement on whether gaming can really be considered addictive. The association is challenging a state law passed in California in 2005 that bars the sales of violent video games to minors (the case was heard by the United States Supreme Court last year). They have also questioned earlier studies by the researcher, Douglas A. Gentile.

But Dr. Gentile, an associate professor of psychology at Iowa State University, says his latest results don’t prove that playing video games causes depression. Rather, he says, in young people a range of mental health problems and what he calls “pathological gaming” may develop in tandem, much as illnesses like the flu and pneumonia can set off one another and lead to new problems.

“You can get the flu, and then get pneumonia, which is a different thing, but it kind of came along with the flu, and flu made you at greater risk for it,” Dr. Gentile said. “And then, once you got the pneumonia, you’re at risk from something else.”

He says his study shows a certain chronological progression: Young people who were more impulsive, more socially inept and less empathetic to begin with were more likely to become excessive video game players. Then, once they became what he terms pathological gamers, their grades were more likely to drop, and their relationships with their parents deteriorated.

Two years later, they were more likely to suffer from depression, social phobias and anxiety than those who played video games less often. In the study, the few heavy gamers who stopped playing so much tended to show fewer symptoms of depression.

Dr. Gentile suggested that teenagers who are experiencing problems may retreat into gaming, and that the gaming may, in turn, increase their depression and isolation. He says that parents should regulate their children’s use of video games and trust their instincts on what constitutes excessive use, something that his critics from the gaming industry also agree on.

“We’ve always said these games should be used in moderation and should be a part of

a well-rounded lifestyle, along with going outside to play, and reading, and doing schoolwork,” said Dan Hewitt, a spokesman for the Entertainment Software Association.

Many teenagers experience mental health problems and can benefit from psychological or medical help, Mr. Hewitt said, but added, “Why point out their game playing?”

That’s where Dr. Gentile disagrees. A gaming habit cannot be ignored, he said. Few youths spontaneously drop the heavy gaming, and even if it’s not the initial trigger for depression, he said, “It looks like it’s an independent actor, not just a symptom of something else.”