

**Title** : More youths seeking help for online addictions

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SINGAPORE: The results of a National Youth Survey released recently have raised concerns over youths spending too much time online. Experts have said that if not monitored, the habit may lead to addiction.

When it comes to internet usage, the latest "State of the Youths in Singapore" report revealed that nearly 8 in 10 youths "strongly agree" or "agree" that they spend their time online for entertainment purposes.

It might not be much of a tell tale sign of a growing social problem but the TOUCH Cyber wellness centre has already begun to see an increase in cases of gaming addiction.

The number of counselling cases went up by 40 per cent last year, to 71 cases, compared to 2009.

Anthony Yeong, programme executive with TOUCH Cyber Wellness & Sports, said: "There are some who play because it is an act of achievement for them, they play just for a competitive nature for the fact of satisfying their personal ego. There is also a lot of personal reason that they are playing because of peers who are playing, and in that sense it's a group activity that they must indulge in.

"Then of course there are also people who are escaping from their real world. They don't like who they are, they prefer to go into the online world. So there are varying reasons why people will get addicted...these are generally the trends that we have noticed."

The good news is that about 7 in 10 of those seen at the centre, attain their counselling goals. However, those who are getting addicted are also much younger.

Ray Chua, assistant manager of TOUCH Cyber Wellness & Sports, said: "Our clients are typically about the age of 14-15, so early teenage years, but we are also seeing cases where they are in the upper primary so 11-12 years old, where parents come to us and say their kids gaming habits are becoming out of control and ask us to help them."

Dr Tan Hwee Sim, a consultant with the Addiction Medicine Department at the Institute of Mental Health, said that the amount of time spent on a computer is not an obvious sign of addiction.

"The actual hours is not a tell-tale sign whether it is an addiction. They will skip school so they can stay home, so they play the game or whether they will play computer games over night. So it's more of whether you are spending the time that you can afford or not, rather than the actual hours," said Dr Tan.

Experts have said that the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook may also add to the problem.

Cases of youths addicted to games on such sites are already starting to crop up.

Mr Chua elaborates: "Besides just gaming, we also notice and are observing a lot more people

getting into social media, of course instances like Facebook, games such as Mafia wars, Mouse Hunt are all on the rise. To date these are just observations that we have made, there are awareness of this platform, we are still observing.

"But we expect it to go grow and we are expecting that it may get big. For the gaming cases, we actually get kids dropping out of school or failing their exams, not so much for social networks as yet, it's an area that we are observing."

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