

Lonely, 60% city kids hooked on mobiles

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Kolkata: At least 60% Kolkata's children aged between nine and 16 years are hooked on cellphones, which makes them prone to attention deficit disorder, depression and suicidal online games, like Momo, point out city psychiatrists. And what's more scary, according to them, is that children are now being given access to cellphones by five years, which is far too early. Falling prey to online games, like Momo, is a fallout of this addiction, according to them.

More and more children now find themselves alone at home for long periods with gadgets, particularly mobiles, as companions, said Fortis Hospital head of mental health and behavioural science Sanjay Garg. "These children tend to cut themselves off from peers and get used to virtual interactions. As they get hooked on gadgets, their behavioural skills are destroyed and they tend to retreat into their own isolated worlds. This leads to loneliness, depression and makes them vulnerable to suicidal games, like Momo," said Garg.

A recent study conducted by the psychiatry department of the Institute of Post-Graduate Medical Education and Research (IPGMER) found one in five children addicted to smartphones. On an average, youngsters spend eight hours a day on a smartphone and both girls and boys were equally addicted to the gadget, it claimed. "It has brought about major behavioural changes in youngsters: mo-

TIPS TO PARENTS

- ▶ Limit time for using gadgets
- ▶ Keep gadgets locked when children are not under adult supervision
- ▶ Insist that cellphones be used in the presence of adults
- ▶ Encourage group activities



and real interaction

- ▶ Keep a tab on the messages sent and received and sites visited by your child
- ▶ Spend at least 30 minutes interacting with your child every day

od swings, hyper-activity, tantrums and often leads to poor academic performance. These are a result of cellphones and elders, too, get addicted. While younger children use smartphones for gaming and texting, older ones use it more for social networking," said Awadesh P Solanki, who was a part of the IPGMER study team. More such gaming apps would come up and their target would be the young and emotionally vulnerable kids, predicted Solanki. "Parents need to be extra cautious and vigilant," he said.

Earlier this week, Garg treated a 14-year-old boy who had slashed his hands playing a virtual game. His parents stopped going to office after the boy refused to give up the mobile. "The parents hardly spend any time with the boy. His life has started revolving around the mobile, which has turned into his sole companion and means of communication," said Garg. "The more youngsters use mobiles, the faster they will lose their real communication skills. It will

pull them away from real people and suck them into the virtual world. The danger is that these youngsters don't yet have the maturity to conduct themselves safely in the virtual world."

Parents were often responsible for addiction, felt Solanki. "They use smartphones to compensate for their inability to give their kids enough time," he said.

Cellphones and social networking sites had turned out to be easy means to earn appreciation, said Garg. "Some apps on phones can make you look better. Or, a snappy comment can get you 'likes' and make you feel good. But in the real world, appreciation is hard to come by. So, it often leads to disappointment making the addicts stick to the virtual world," he said.

"Children should be encouraged to play outdoor or indoor games. They need to spend more time with friends off the virtual platform. While gadgets can't be ruled out altogether, a balance has to be struck," said psychiatrist J Ram.