



# Parents need to 'get smart' with digital

BEN LANGFORD

PSYCHIATRISTS are seeing an increase in internet gaming addiction in children, prompting a warning to parents to "get involved in the digital playground" with their offspring.

University of Sydney lecturer and child psychiatrist Dr Philip Tam said he saw about one child every few weeks who had an addiction problem with games in Sydney's inner west alone.

Sometimes the problem got to the point where children had dropped out of school because they were not sleeping at night, instead staying up playing games and eventually reversing their sleep-wake pattern.

Dr Tam estimated there could be thousands of teenagers for whom the "disorder" was severe.

"At times ... I've been getting 50 to 100 calls from [parents] all over Australia," he said.

"It's like a really big problem that's out there clearly, from what I hear, [but] it's just at the cusp of official recognition and, of course, of being researched."

The problem has been listed for further study by the US mental health "bible" *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and Dr Tam is planning a national study on the issue in Australia.

Macquarie University's Dr Wayne Warburton said the current

recommendation of no "screen time" for children under two, and one to two hours a day for children aged over two, were usually exceeded in many families.

He said the recommendations may need to be revised as they were born from an era when TV watching was almost the only "screen time" kids would experience.

But screens are not all bad news.

Macquarie University Institute for Early Childhood lecturer Dr Kate Highfield said technology gave new opportunities for more learning – focused on creativity rather than just consumption.

Dr Highfield said now the "technology genie" was out of the bottle, it was up to parents to manage it smartly.

"We can't put the technology back," she said.

"The technology is here to stay and it's very hard to put the genie back in the bottle."

She said rather than using iPads and other screens as "digital dummies", parents needed to get involved with their children's online experiences, encouraging creative play.

"Be present in the digital playground, just like you would be in the physical playground," she said.