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## Experts discuss protecting kids from dangers in Digital Age

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

**Groton** - Before giving their children their own cellphones, access to the Internet and video games, parents should develop a media plan, set time limits for use and establish rules their children will be expected to follow or risk losing the privilege.

That was one of the recommendations made by Dr. Paul Weigle, Natchaug Hospital psychiatrist and expert on video game and Internet addiction, during a forum Thursday titled "iSafety: Protecting Kids in the Digital Age."

"Only half of kids surveyed said their parents have any rules about how much time they spend on video games," said Weigle, one of four panelists in the program sponsored by Natchaug Hospital and United Community & Family Services.

Natchaug Hospital, based in Mansfield, has outpatient programs in Groton and Old Saybrook, while UCFS provides health services at its clinic in Norwich. The forum, attended by about 30 people, took place at the Hilton Garden Inn in Groton and is one of a series on the topic of Internet and video game safety being sponsored around the state by the hospital.

The average youth spends 7.5 hours per day on some form of electronic media, including cellphones, the Internet, video games, music and television, Weigle noted. That's about twice as much time as they spend on school-related activities, and far in excess of the one to two hours per day recommended by mental health experts, he said.

"The more time kids spend, the less physically active they are, the more likely they are to be obese, the lower their academic achievement, and the worse sleep habits they have," he said. While video game and Internet addiction is not an official psychiatric diagnosis in the United States, he said, about 12 to 15 percent of youth meet the criteria for addiction based on their behaviors, which include the inability to stop, preoccupation and cravings when the devices are taken away, and increasing difficulty with face-to-face interactions.

"The kids who are addicted feel less competent in the real world, have a lack of connections with others, and develop depression," he said.

Preventing these problems by establishing firm limits at the outset, he advised, is far easier than trying to treat the problem once it has developed.

"When it's taken away, some youth can act out, and become desperate," he said.

Panelist Fred Fetta, gambling counselor at UCFS, said parents need to make their children aware of the dangers of problem gambling, especially given the accessibility of online gambling sites. Some children start using these sites as young as 8 years old, he said.

"The earlier you start, the more potent the problem becomes," he said.

Another panelist, Scott Driscoll, a police officer recently retired from the FBI's cyber crimes unit, now runs a consulting firm to advise communities about cyber safety for youth. Parents and youth need to be more aware of the "digital footprints" they are leaving on social media and emails that could hurt or help them in getting into colleges, obtaining scholarships and with potential employers, he said. He added that monitoring their child's Facebook page isn't

enough anymore - youth are more frequent users of sites such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

"These have taken over what Facebook used to be," he said.

He recommended parents "lay the foundation for safety" with their children by checking their phones and Internet activity daily and taking devices away when they're being used inappropriately.

"As parents, we are not legally responsible to provide the top technology to our fourth-graders," said Driscoll, who is the father of two teenagers. "We don't have to give it to them."

In response to a question from one mother in the audience, Driscoll said that while laying a foundation of open communication and limit-setting with their children is key, there are some tools parents can use to assist them in monitoring Internet and cellphone use. These include AppCertain, which imposes a nighttime curfew on use of devices, and another app, QuickLook, as well as the OpenDNS filtering system.

"Parents need to have the authority," he said. "Oftentimes, parents have given away that authority."

Children also benefit from parents talking openly about mental health and letting them know it's OK to seek help, said Chris Erskine, who leads mental health first aid training programs at Natchaug. In his classes, he teaches people how to recognize when someone is having a psychiatric crisis and how to offer support.

"The bottom line is early intervention," he said.

One audience member, elementary school teacher Connie Murphy, asked how the relationship between playing violent video games contributes to violent behavior.

Research shows that the majority of youth who play these games do not become violent, Weigle said.

"But among the kids who are playing them the most, there is a subset who does become violent," he said. "You're replaying this violent script, and those violent thoughts do start to come more naturally, especially among impressionable kids, younger kids and those who spend more time playing the games."

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