Teen Addiction to Cybersex Called Pervasive

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COLORADO SPRINGS — Children—and middle school–aged boys in particular—are becoming addicted to sex on the Internet in numbers that would startle most clinicians and parents, Ann Freeman said at a symposium on addictive disorders sponsored by Psychotherapy Associates.

She said that she commonly encounters inadequate-feeling, socially isolated youngsters going through the tumult of puberty whose first sexual experience of arousal and orgasm occurred on the Internet and who are addicted to masturbating in the family computer room to sexually explicit Internet sites three or four times daily.

"This issue of young middle school–aged kids being aroused to the Internet is something that I think people are really not very aware of. It's a major problem that I see. Almost every kid I see in my private practice, including those who are supposedly not seeing me for any kind of sexual issue, has some issues around arousal to the Internet," said Ms. Freeman, a program director for the Colorado Division of Youth Corrections who also maintains a private psychotherapy practice in Colorado Springs.

"We have kids that you don't want in the same room with a computer because it's so arousing. A lot of people who work with kids really don't understand the level of arousal and addiction and habituation. Some of these kids, unfortunately, while still feeling inadequate, will transfer that and will molest or sexually touch a younger child. This is not an unusual progression," she said.

Ms. Freeman encouraged every practitioner who works with children or practices family therapy—and certainly everyone who does formal evaluation and assessment of juvenile sex offenders—to ask the youths a series of open-ended questions about their computer "face time" and their Internet use, eventually zeroing in on how often they frequent sexually explicit Web sites and chat rooms.

"You'll be amazed at where this takes you," she promised.

She has found cognitive-behavioral therapy to be effective in redirecting youths addicted to cybersex, although often she first has to treat an accompanying depression.

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Addiction to cybersex is a problem particularly among young people whose families are marked by domestic violence or drug and alcohol problems.

"Those are the kinds of kids who'll go to the Internet and get power from that, because they are so powerless in their family systems," Ms. Freeman observed.

Her warning about the increasing emotional havoc among youths who are becoming addicted to pornographic Internet sites was supported by another speaker, Paul M. Isenstadt, a social worker who is director of program and residential services at ComCor Inc., a Colorado Springs–based nonprofit community corrections program.

"Access to the Internet is probably the greatest disinhibitor for adolescents. We used to think the use of drugs and alcohol was what broke down defenses. We still see that. But I believe based on my experience that the greatest disinhibitor now is the Internet. The Internet provides the three As of affordability, accessibility, and anonymity. There's an immediate response," he said. ■

CDC Targets Social, Emotional Growth

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has launched a public awareness campaign to educate parents about the importance of measuring a child's social and emotional progress in early life. "Learn the Signs. Act Early" provides free resources in English and Spanish for parents and physicians. For more information, contact the CDC by calling 800-232-4656 or by visiting www.cdc.gov/actearly.