

Digital addiction has teens wearing nappies

IT'S China's biggest addiction, and a problem every family in the country could face.

With 700 million people having access to the internet, more and more teenagers are being forced in to 'military-style' detox camps to break what has been dubbed a 'dangerous digital dependence'.

With some teens engrossing themselves in more than 17 hours of screentime and game play on a daily basis, desperate parents have turned to rigid, army-style training to break the bond between their child and computer.

"Addiction to drugs or alcohol for example, isn't widespread among young Chinese people."

Director of China's first ever Digital Detox camp, Tao Ran, said in a new documentary created by RT.

"Teens can't easily buy alcohol, but the internet is so easily accessible and it costs almost nothing."

China has become one of the first countries in the world to recognise internet addiction officially as a clinical condition. Hundreds of special camps have opened across the country, to help young people overcome their web dependence.

In 2011, a Chinese man died after internet gaming for three days straight. Just last year, another man collapsed and died inside an internet cafe in Shanghai after playing World of Warcraft for 19 hours straight, despite doctors suggesting the 24-year-old take 'significant rest' for a health issue.

With parents seeking a desperate solution to save their children from the screen, many enrol their teenagers into a minimum six-month program with institutions such as China's Youth Rehabilitation Base.

Costing families around \$1500 a month, most parents are willing to pay any price to see their son or daughter recover from their addiction.

"People swept up in an online addiction often played in online groups, and if one of the player's needs to pee during the game, he was so afraid of interrupting the game that he would put on a diaper," Mr Ran said.

"They think they don't have time, to even go to the toilet! Some even wear diapers."

"These people played computer games 24/7, and they can't communicate with others. They are completely hopeless with household chores, and have just one meal each day."

Mr Ran has been involved in the digital detox program since 2008, when the camp first started accepting people with a digital addiction.

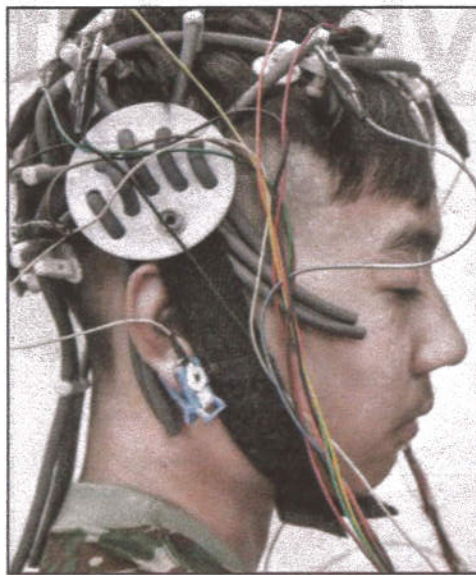
Standing in front of a group of young men and women, Mr Ran barks at the teenagers as if they are in the military.

"I am supposed to be a prison warden, although it's not a prison in a literal sense," Mr Ran said.

"I must care for them, like a kindergarten head. I am meant to educate them, as though I were a school master, and treat them as if I were a psychiatrist."

"Military training will improve your health, and a sound mind can only be in a sound body."

By day, the participants stand in line and march dozens of times around the premises concrete courtyard. Saluting their instructor,



A resident at the Internet Addiction Treatment Centre (IATC) is wired up for electroencephalogram scans to measure brain activity.

the group of teenagers will stand tall and completely still for at least 20 minutes, while keeping their backs straight in an attempt to reform their posture. Outside exercise, they are also required to attend relationship lectures and one-on-one psychologist sessions.

Mr and Mrs Jeng, who were forced to admit their son Lin into the detox program, said their only child had become so addicted to gaming, he would spend 13 to 14 hours each day on the internet.

"He had so little sleep, and didn't leave his room for six months," Mr Jeng said in the documentary.

"He never even saw the sun, and consciously locked himself away."

"I had no choice but to trick him [into rehab], so he still hates me. He's given me the silent treatment for three months."

Mr Ran admitted that Lin's reaction about arriving at the camp was quite common, and expressed by most new boys entering the detox program.

"At first, every boy dreams of running away," he said.

"But you can see why we bring them here. That's why we have so many guards here, but still every year someone manages to escape. You can't even imagine the ways they manage to run!"

Mr Ran said 'blame' and 'resentment' were two of the biggest emotions felt by new teenagers who were admitted into the program, and that for the first month, the children hated the parents and the staff at the camp equally.

"They think playing at home on their computer was just fine, then all-of-a-sudden, someone brought them here," he said.

"During the first month, they want to run away ... and then in the second month they start to wonder if they do have a problem. Then they realise that, yes, they do have a problem, but it's their parents who are bad."

On one occasion, Mr Ran admitted one patient was so desperate to leave the facility, he used salt water to rust the window bars to escape. The teenager would drip some of the salty substance on to the bars, and after six months, the bars gave way.

"They tied all the bedsheets together, climbed down them, and made their escape."

Lin, who is predominantly featured in



Some of the boys within the Digital detox Rehabilitation Base.

the documentary, blamed his parents for not understanding what he wants as his reasoning for turning to the online world.

"They have no idea what I want in life, they just give me what I used to need, but that's not what I need now," he said.

"They think the most important thing is to give me enough food, but I don't care about food. If I'm not hungry and I'm not cold, that's enough for me."

Lin, who was 'tricked' by his parents in to rehab, said he hasn't spoken to them for three months.

"I was at home, people came and I later learned they were from the camp," Lin said.

"At first, they said they were from the police, and that I'd committed some sort of internet scam. I had no idea where they were taking me, I went on a hunger strike for 10 days. I stayed in bed all day and only drank water. I knew nothing about this place, I was frightened and wanted to get out of here."

Lin's parents Mr and Mrs Jeng went to Beijing more than 10 years ago to open a clothes shop, and provide a better life for their son than what they grew up with.

"A few years ago he stopped calling us mum and dad, and three months ago he completely stopped talking to us," Mrs Jeng said.

"Running a small business, we didn't have much time to speak to our son. Living in different towns... we didn't take good care of him."

"We ran a business for our family's sake, and lost our child," Mr Jeng added.

With his son Lin only communicating to him in rehab through questions on a piece of paper, Mr Jeng said his son 'doesn't understand' that he and his wife only want their child to get help for his addiction.

"He thinks that since childhood, we never took good care of him," Mr Jeng said.

"He says that we don't know what he thinks. We were busy running our own business, so we didn't take good care of our son."

Mr Ran said the problem with a lot of the teenagers who enter the program live with very controlling parents who manage all areas of their child's life — including food, studies and even friends.

"They control everything, so the kids have very little room for development," he said.

"Their mental age is below their real age, and that's a fundamental problem, and it's because the parents think they're always right, and that everything they do, is for the good of their children."

Mr Ran said of the parents that don't have a prominent and controlling role in their child's life are at the other end of the spectrum, and tend to almost ignore their child, run a business and leave them alone or with grandparents.

"Both these cases, the result is the same — the children don't believe in themselves," he said.

"Why do they get so immersed in the internet? Because there, they are heroes who are in control and that feels real. 'What I can't get at home, I get on the web'."

One mother, whose son was currently in the detox program, admitted that her relationship with her son reached a point of no return where he would completely ignore her, and the only way she could 'interrupt his internet time' was by scraping on his bedroom door.

"Once when he was playing, we opened the door with a key and made him stop. He gave us such an angry look that it scared us."

While the obsession with online gaming or internet surfing considered just the tip of the iceberg, Mr Ran said patients within the camp remain confined until their obsession is under control.

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Inside the sleeping quarters of the digital detox base.