BEIJING (Reuters) - Combining sympathy with discipline, a military-style boot camp near Beijing is at the front-line of China's battle against Internet addiction, a disorder afflicting millions of the nation's youth.

The Internet Addiction Treatment Center (IATC) in Daxing county uses a blend of therapy and military drills to treat the children of China's nouveau riche addicted to online games, Internet pornography, cybersex and chats.

"I gradually became obsessed," said Li Yanlin, a university student whose grades plunged after he became addicted to Internet games. But after several weeks at the Daxing facility, the 18-year-old said he "recognized the falseness of online gaming."

Concerned by a number of high-profile Internet-related deaths and juvenile crime, the government is now taking steps to stem Internet addictions by banning new Internet cafes and mulling restrictions on violent computer games.

The government-funded Daxing center, run by an army colonel under the Beijing Military Hospital, is one of a handful of clinics treating patients with Internet addictions in China.

Patients, overwhelmingly male and aged 14 to 19, wake up in common dormitories at 6.15 a.m. to do morning calisthenics and march on the cracked concrete grounds wearing khaki fatigues.

Drill sergeants bark orders at them when they are not attending group and one-on-one counseling sessions. Therapy includes patients simulating war games with laser guns.

The IATC's tough love approach to breaking Internet addiction is unique to China, but necessary in a country with over two million teenage Internet addicts, according to facility staff.

"Many of the Internet addicts here have rarely considered other peoples' feelings. The military training allows them to feel what it's like to be a part of a team," said Xu Leiting.
military training allows them to feel what it's like to be a part of a team," said Xu Leiting, a psychologist at the hospital. "It also helps their bodies recover and makes them stronger."

The IATC has treated 1,500 patients in this way since opening in 2004, and boasts a 70 percent success rate at breaking addictions.

The fees cost about 10,000 yuan ($1,290) a month, nearly a year's average disposable income in China. But the center takes on pro bono cases for poor families, said Tao Ran, its director.

"There is no trend for Internet addiction as far as social or economic status, or geography, are concerned. So long as they can get access to a computer, there will be addiction," Tao said.

INTERNET VIOLENCE

At the end of 2006, China had 137 million Internet users, an increase of 23.4 percent from the previous year.

Of users under 18, an estimated 13 percent -- or 2.3 million -- are Internet addicts, according to a 2006 study by the China National Children's Center.

Internet addiction rates posted in Western studies vary wildly, with little consensus as to what constitutes addiction and whether the concept exists.

A Stanford University of Medicine report in 2006 found one in eight adults find it hard to be away from the Internet for several days, but the report was inconclusive as to whether excessive use could be defined as an addiction.

China's health authorities, however, have few illusions about placing Internet addiction on a par with alcoholism, drug-taking and gambling.

"The effects are the same," Tao said. "Some addicts drop out of school, some mug people for money, steal and sell their families' things to keep playing games. Some end up killing themselves because they feel life has no point."

The social consequences of addiction had caught the government off guard -- as had the Internet's explosive growth.

"Suddenly, from a handful of users in 1997, China now has over 130 million. People can get online in the most remote places. The legal system did not have time to develop," Tao said.

Addiction to the Internet is blamed for most juvenile crime in China, a number of suicides, and deaths from exhaustion by players unable to tear themselves away from marathon game sessions.

In 2005, a Shanghai court handed a life sentence to an online game player who stabbed a competitor to death for stealing his cyber-sword -- a virtual prize earned during gameplay.

PARENTAL PRESSURE

The rising tide of Internet-addicted youth has prompted the government to ban new Internet cafes in 2007, which are seen in China as breeding grounds for social
Delegates at the National People's Congress, China's annual session of parliament, have proposed stricter criminal punishments for Internet cafe operators who admit minors, and have flagged restrictions on violent games.

"Even President Hu Jintao talked of developing a scientific and civilized Internet environment recently," Tao said.

But China's Internet addiction is not merely a product of an imperfect regulatory system, Xu Leiting said.

"The main cause of Internet addiction is that parents' expectations for their children are too high," said Xu.

With education perceived by many parents as the only means of advancement in an ultra-competitive society of 1.3 billion people, some lock their children up to study and ask teachers to assign them extra homework.

The pressure can be too much for some children, Xu said, especially if they fail.

"Then they escape to the virtual world to seek achievements, importance and satisfaction, or a sense of belonging."
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