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Doc's orders – play video games

Gaming is being used as an unconventional tool to treat a range of conditions — from ADHD and autism to spinal trauma

Sharmila Ganesan-Ram | TNN

Saiyam's muscles are neither patient nor totally in control. Within a span of ten minutes, they have made the eight-year-old boy play beach volleyball, salute an army general with the wrong hand, curse a formidable tennis opponent in Hindi and duck a little too late to avoid being hit by a virtual shoe.

Even as he waits for his 'teacher' to change the video game, Saiyam is restless. "How did you stay put in your mother's tummy for nine months?" Dr Saifuddin Bijliwala asks him.

Bijliwala is the director of Jumpstart, an occupational therapy centre in Mumbai for kids with developmental challenges ranging from cerebral palsy to autism. Saiyam suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), which means he gets bored easily, doesn't always remember to use his left hand even though he is a leftie and his speech isn't as fast as his

thoughts. Saiyam plays a series of Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 2 games because gaming, Bijliwala believes, is a crucial part of changing the nervous system.

"Video games help these kids become more dexterous, teaches them balance and how to use space," says Bijliwala. While his centre added games to conventional occupational therapy exercises a few years ago, doctors across the nation seem to be warming to the idea of using virtual reality in therapy and healing.

The Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC) in Delhi set up a Nintendo Wii console six months ago. Here, physiotherapy patients with upper limb problems may spend an hour each day playing sports games such as basketball with a remote which helps them develop upper body strength. Accident victims suffering from spinal trauma can be seen playing skiing games that requires them to lean to either side of a balance board to direct the player's movements.



Shriram Venkatar

HANDS ON: Saiyam's mother, Deepa Jain used to feel video games were no good until she saw them not only holding her son's attention but also improving his handwriting

"We advise different games depending on the condition and extent of injury," says Dr Chita Kataria, head of the rehabilitation department of ISIC, attributing the slight acceleration in the recovery of her patients in the last few months to gaming.

Kataria adds that its effectiveness has been "proven globally." In the US and UK, video games have been developed specifically for therapeutic use for ailments such as Parkinson's disease and cancer.

In India, however, the concept,

despite its affordability and proven benefits, hasn't been that popular. "This has to do with our reverence for convention in medicine and the perception that video games are violent or unproductive. Besides, game developing is seen as a commercial, not a social, enterprise," says Anil Nayak, director of Kartavya Healtheon, a disease management company in Mumbai, which has distributed a PC game called Re-mission to over 2,000 patients in India so far. In this game designed by a US-based NGO, players get to

move a robot through the bodies of fictitious cancer patients, bashing cancerous cells. Things like side-effects, early detection, proper nutrition and compliance of chemotherapy regimen are touched upon at various points. Nayak's firm is planning to dub the game in regional Indian languages. Dr Rakesh Badhe, consultant oncologist, Kohinoor Hospital, Mumbai, is dismissive of the role of such games — "They can work as placebo and create awareness but they have no real therapeutic value."

However, where these games seem to help is in allaying parents. Saiyam's mother, Deepa Jain, for instance, used to feel video games were no good until she saw them not only arresting her son's attention but also improving his handwriting. "His pencil used to slip from his fingers but now his grip has improved," says Jain.

Towards the end of his one-hour therapy session, Saiyam slides into the square pool of colourful balls in the room with his tablet and loses himself in a game where he pilots a virtual man through railway tracks. It's now time for him to leave. Just before he does, he quickly checks with his teacher: "Sir, no therapy today?"