

Nev. couple blame Internet for neglect

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A couple who authorities say were so obsessed with the Internet and video games that they left their babies starving and suffering other health problems have pleaded guilty to child neglect.

The children of Michael and Lana Straw, a boy age 22 months and a girl age 11 months, were severely malnourished and near death last month when doctors saw them after social workers took them to a hospital, authorities said. Both children are doing well and gaining weight in foster care, prosecutor Kelli Ann Vilorio told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Michael Straw, 25, and Lana Straw, 23, pleaded guilty Friday to two counts each of child neglect. Each faces a maximum 12-year prison sentence.

Vilorio said the Reno couple were too distracted by online video games, mainly the fantasy role-playing "Dungeons & Dragons" series, to give their children proper care.

"They had food; they just chose not to give it to their kids because they were too busy playing video games," Vilorio told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Police said hospital staff had to shave the head of the girl because her hair was matted with cat urine. The 10-pound girl also had a mouth infection, dry skin and severe dehydration.

Her brother had to be treated for starvation and a genital infection. His lack of muscle development caused him difficulty in walking, investigators said.

The Straws have been given public defenders. Jeremy Bosler, head of the county public defender's office, declined to comment to The Associated Press on Saturday.

Michael Straw is an unemployed cashier, and his wife worked for a temporary staffing agency doing warehouse work, according to court records. He received a \$50,000 inheritance that he spent on computer equipment and a large plasma television, authorities said.

While child abuse because of drug addiction is common, abuse rooted in video game addiction is rare, Vilorio said.

Last month, experts at an American Medical Association meeting backed away from a proposal to designate video game addiction as a mental disorder, saying it had to be studied further. Some said the issue is like alcoholism, while others said there was no concrete evidence it's a psychological disease.

Patrick Killen, spokesman for Nevada Child Abuse Prevention, said video game addiction's correlation to child abuse is "a new spin on an old problem."

"As we become more technologically advanced, there's more distractions," Killen said. "It's easy for someone to get addicted to something and neglect their children. Whether it's video games or meth, it's a serious issue, and (we) need to become more aware of it."