

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and mobile technology are increasingly important to the educational and social lives of children, and are becoming a part of children's identity. As one young person said to Childnet at one of its recent focus group meetings, "Take away my mobile phone and you take away a part of me!"

With the advent of broadband and mobile access to the Internet giving young people access to the Internet any place and at any time, and thus 24/7 entertainment, interaction and communication, there is a real risk that children can become so immersed in their online world that it can seem to take over their lives. It is easy to see why some children and young people love spending many hours pursuing their interests, playing games, finding information and communicating with friends (and strangers) online. However, when this use becomes obsessive and at the expense of other aspects of a young person's life, this use of the Internet could be problematic and could even be classified as Internet addiction.

This guide produced by Childnet has drawn on other resources and serves as an introduction to the subject and will help you as parents or carers think about the issue of Internet addiction, what the indicators of addiction are and tips for helping children. It will also highlight further resources and services that are available.

WHAT IS INTERNET ADDICTION?

Internet Addiction, Internet Addiction Disorder, Compulsive Internet Use, Computer Addiction, Internet Dependence and Problematic Internet Use - all of these are essentially terms that have been applied to those that **spend excessive amounts of time online at the expense of and to the detriment of other aspects of their lives**. The obsessive behaviour takes the form of particular activities, and might include any or all of the following:

- **Relationships:** spending excessive amounts of time starting and maintaining online friendships in chat rooms, which replace real-life friends and family.
- **Money:** compulsively gambling online, trading online, and partaking in online auctions.
- **Information searching:** compulsive web surfing or database searches.
- **Gaming:** obsessive computer game playing, including multi-user games.
- **Sex:** addiction to adult chatrooms, cyber sex or pornography on the Internet.

There has been an increasing amount of attention given to this phenomenon, and attempts to quantify the problem have produced some staggering statistics: for example, figures suggesting that as many as 6-10% of the 189 million US Internet users¹ have a dependency on the Internet, and there are as many as 1 million German Internet addicts². There have also been cases recorded of addiction to texting on mobile phones³.

WHO CAN BECOME ADDICTED TO THE INTERNET?

Essentially, anyone with access to the Internet can become dependent upon it regardless of gender or age. The Internet and mobile technologies offer a world of attractions to all: it is 24/7 and it is easily accessible, and it offers continuous entertainment and stimulation. It also offers the opportunity for anonymity and can offer an escape from reality, and it can be a place where you can lower your inhibitions and experience an increased sense of intimacy.

¹ See www.nytimes.com/2005/12/01/fashion/thursdaystyles/01addict.html?ex=1291093200&en=1a8916920717f083&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss

² 'When the Internet Gives you a High', Deutsche Welle, www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,803719,00.html.

³ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4342326.stm> and www.iht.com/articles/2004/01/24/itaddict_ed3_.php.

However, addiction may not be about the attractiveness of the Internet alone. It is recognised that Internet addiction may also “be symptomatic of other problems such as depression, anger and low self-esteem”⁴.

THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH INTERNET ADDICTION

These include:

- Skipping meals, losing sleep and time for other things, even
- Rearranging daily routines and neglecting studies or other activities and responsibilities to spend more time online⁵.
- This has the potential to affect school performance and relationships with friends or family.
- There may be financial problems depending on the nature of the communication - e.g. dial-up connection or text messages - and the activity online - e.g. paying for content, gambling and subscriptions.
- There are also physical problems associated with bad diet, lack of exercise and also with extended computer use (for example dry eyes, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, and backache⁶),

INDICATORS OF TOO MUCH INTERNET USE

Researchers in Taiwan have argued that more than 20 hours per week constitutes Internet addiction. This figure has been echoed in the research conducted in the U.S. and Europe⁷. This is a similar level to television addiction with the average person watching in the region of 11-13 hours per week and those addicted watching in excess of 21 hours per week. However, **time is not the only indicator of problematic Internet use**. The following is a list of other indicators that may help you decide if you or someone you know is spending too much time online:

- Preoccupation with the Internet, perhaps being the strongest source of satisfaction in a person’s life
- Less investment in relationships with friends and interruption of social relationships
- Feeling empty, depressed and irritable when not at the computer⁸
- Suffering withdrawal symptoms when without access or when reducing Internet use - these symptoms include anxiety, restlessness, depression, even trembling hands
- Craving more and more time at the computer⁹
- Deception regarding time spent online
- Denial of the seriousness of the problem
- Lack of sleep and excess fatigue
- Declining school results
- Withdrawal from school social activities and events
- Rationalising that what you learn on the Net is superior to school

⁴ www.bewebaware.ca/english/Internetaddiction.aspx

⁵ Lin, S. and Tsai, C-C. (2002) Sensation seeking and Internet dependence of Taiwanese high school adolescents. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18, 411-426.

⁶ See www.utdallas.edu/counseling/selfhelp/computer-addiction.html.

⁷ Lin, S. and Tsai, C-C. (2002) Sensation seeking and Internet dependence of Taiwanese high school adolescents. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18, 411-426.

⁸ www.bewebaware.ca/english/Internetaddiction.aspx

⁹ Yang, S.C. and Tung, C.J. (2004) Comparison of Internet addicts and non-addicts in Taiwanese high school. *Computers in Human Behaviour*.

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

There are advantages in introducing good habits about Internet usage with children from the outset, to help them become accustomed to the Internet being time-limited and in balance with other activities. With very young children, for example, it may be appropriate to limit the time spent on the Internet with a timer which you set after agreeing a time limit with your child.

If you are concerned your child is spending too much time on the Internet, you might want to try to establish a healthier balance between Internet use and other activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep your computer in a shared family room, not in a child's bedroom.
- Find out how much time your child is spending online. Ask yourself if your child's Internet use is affecting his or her school performance, health, and relationships with family and friends.
- Don't ban the Internet - it is an important part of most children's social lives. Instead, establish reasonable rules about where your children can go online and what they can do there - and stick to them. Such rules might include: an Internet time log, ie to limit the amount of time online each day (though remember that mobile phones, Internet cafes and friends' houses may provide alternative Internet access points); no surfing or instant messaging until they complete their homework; you might have a policy to limit the access to chat rooms. There is computer software that can help to limit the amount of time spent online, see <http://kids.getnetwise.org/tools/timelimits> for more information on Time Limiting tools, but be sure to discuss this with your children first.
- Talk to your child about why they are spending so much time online, and what they are spending their time doing, and discuss this with the view to encourage and support your child's participation in other activities - particularly physical activities - and help your child to socialise offline with other children. Finding and encouraging your child into an offline activity that links in with their online interests could be a possibility here.
- Consider speaking to your school's counsellor. They may be able to provide the necessary support for your child. They may also be able to provide you with local contacts.
- If your child is demonstrating strong signs of Internet addiction, consider seeking professional counselling. It might be worth speaking to your local GP/doctor. He/She will be able to provide you with further information on where you can receive help for you or a loved one's addiction.

OUTSIDE RESOURCES

The Centre for Online and Internet Addiction, www.netaddiction.com, has a very useful website dedicated to helping those concerned about Internet addiction. Its resources range from addiction self-tests and parent-child tests to the provision of varying counselling methods, which can be accessed through books, online or even over the phone.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- More information on the psychological and physical symptoms of Internet addiction, as well as tips for parents, look at www.bewebaware.ca/english/Internetaddiction.aspx.
- This BBC article give some examples from the sufferers' perspective <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1887467.stm>
- An article from Korea for teachers entitled 'A Learning System for Internet Addiction Prevention' can be found at: <http://csdl2.computer.org/comp/proceedings/icalt/2004/2181/00/21810836.pdf>
- Camp for Internet Addiction for German children, see www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,943281,00.html
- 'Problematic Internet or mobile phone use - restoring a healthy balance' by Liz Butterfield, NetSafe, NZ, www.netsafe.theoutfitgroup.co.nz/articles/articles_general.aspx
- A webpage with links to helplines dealing with other addiction problems; www.channel4.com/life/microsites/H/helplines/phone_g_dependency.html