



Problematic Internet Use

Young people and the online world are synonymous, but when does it become excessive?

What is problematic internet use?

‘The Internet appears to be capable of altering the mood, motivation, concentration, and producing a dissociating and disinhibiting experience for users. For some individuals, patterns of use can transform to abuse, taking on a compulsive quality ... Many of the daily spheres of behaviour, including work, appear to be effected by this powerful technology.’

Dr David Greenfield, Centre for Internet Behaviour, USA

Problematic internet use is addictive behaviour—excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviours regarding computer use and internet access that lead to impairment or distress.

The problem is more common in adolescent males than females and is very often linked to playing online games. In severe cases, online activity takes over the person’s life to the exclusion of all else.

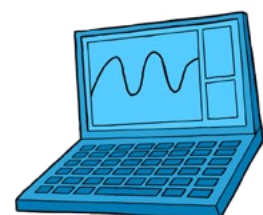
Internet addiction has been documented and studied around the world. It is not however currently included in DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Edition IV). This means it cannot be diagnosed by a doctor, so access to medical treatment rebates is limited.

Online games

Computer games today may be very different to what parents remember. Games can now be played over the internet with players interacting with other gamers all around the world.

Online games can be very involved and immersive, mimicking real life achievements and interactions, demanding huge investments of time from large networks of players. A commonly cited example is World of Warcraft (WoW for short), an online multi-player virtual world game which has been recognised by researchers and players around the world as extremely addictive.

Online gaming can also be a concern when young children connect with people that they do not know. See the ‘Online Grooming’ fact sheet for further information on this.



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Risk factors

Some young people have been identified as particularly 'at risk' of developing problems with excessive internet use. A young person could be at risk if they:

- Suffer from depression and/or anxiety
- Have been diagnosed with an ADHD-type illness
- Have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome
- Lack social support and have few friends in the 'real' world
- Are bored or stressed (using games as an escape from problems)
- Have a physical disability or otherwise impaired mobility
- Face a breakdown in family or social bonds

Signs of problematic internet use

There is no definitive list of signs that indicate problematic internet use but here are some things to look for:

- Losing track of time online
- Having trouble completing homework or household chores on time
- Isolation from family and friends—replacing real friends with exclusively online friends or other gamers
- Feeling guilty or defensive about the time they spend online—"I don't have a problem, you are the one with the problem"
- Only feeling happy when in the gaming environment

- Withdrawal from daily activities, poor school attendance, withdrawing from sport teams
- Physical symptoms such as carpal tunnel syndrome, dry eyes or strained vision, back and neck aches, headaches, sleep disturbances, pronounced weight gain or loss

What can I do?

Establishing that your child has a problem around their use of the internet or online games can be difficult. Their behaviour may quickly move from manageable to appearing hopeless.

A way to be aware of the possible issues your child is facing is to make sure that from the first game your child plays online, you play too. You need to see the content of the game to ensure suitability and also to understand the way the game works. Make sure the content is age and developmentally suitable for your child. The fact that others your child's age play the game is not a good guide as to its suitability for your child. Check not only the rating of the game, view the content as well.

Set very clear rules about your child's online gaming and have strict time limits. If you see your child continually trying to push the boundaries, staying online for longer than allowed or logging on when you are out or asleep, then do not ignore these signs.

For further information please visit NIIRA.org.au, the website of the Network for Internet Investigation and Research Australia, an Australian organisation devoted to the issue of problematic internet use. You can download a self-assessment tool called '[i.m.p.r.o.v.e](#)'. that will help you to identify the level of problem you may be experiencing within your family.