

Growing Up Online:

Working with Children, Youth, and Families Experiencing Problematic Use of Digital Technology

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BACKGROUND

Problematic use of digital technology is defined as any digital activity that causes significant distress to emotional and physical well-being, and which has a negative impact on day-to-day life. When children and youth experience problematic use of technology, the impact to the nervous system is similar to abuse of substances and mostly impacts socioemotional areas.^{1a}

- 50% of teens are using social media 'hourly' or 'constantly'^{1b} and report feeling 'addicted' to their phones²
 - 92% of one-year-olds have already used a mobile device²
- Advancements in digital technology have changed the way children and youth communicate, work, socialize, and engage in entertainment.

PURPOSE

To assist service providers with best practice information, including screening and assessment tools in instances when digital technology is perceived as problematic for children, youth, and their families. World Health Organization (WHO) identifies four areas of concern: Social Networking, Gaming, Online Gambling, and Sexual Internet-based preoccupations (e.g. Online Pornography).³

While most youth are able to maintain balance in their lives and utilize digital technology in a healthy manner, there is a pattern of use amongst youth that warrants further attention and intervention.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social Networking (SN) is the act of sharing ideas, photos or videos, messaging, chatting, dating, emailing, and socializing in an online community using applications, known as a Social Networking Sites (SNSs).⁴ Problematic SN can impact the wellbeing and life satisfaction of young people, including:

- Involvement in sharing of inappropriate information and material
- Exposure to cyberbullying
- Influence of social media on body image
- Sourcing of harmful content or advice, such as websites or social networks enabling the promotion of self-harm

GAMING

Gaming refers to playing electronic games, whether through consoles, computers, mobile phones or another medium altogether.

Videogames are increasingly addictive in nature due to the interaction between an individual's predisposition and the design of modern games. Individuals who play video games daily are more likely to report problems in different areas of their life:

- Relationships, social difficulties and physical health problems⁵
- Poorer school grades and a higher rate of attention problems⁶
- Depression; anxiety; trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Conflict in the home and or parental neglect

ONLINE GAMBLING

Online gambling can be defined as virtual platforms for traditional forms of gambling with potential monetary gains and losses.⁷ Youth 12-24 years of age are at higher risk for problem gambling due to the unique developmental aspects of adolescence, including mood lability, impulsivity, and increased independence from their guardians.⁸

Problem gambling is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including:

- Physical and mental health concerns
- Co-morbid substance use⁷
- Financial problems, stealing or other legal/criminal issues
- School issues and parent-child relational conflict⁹

ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY

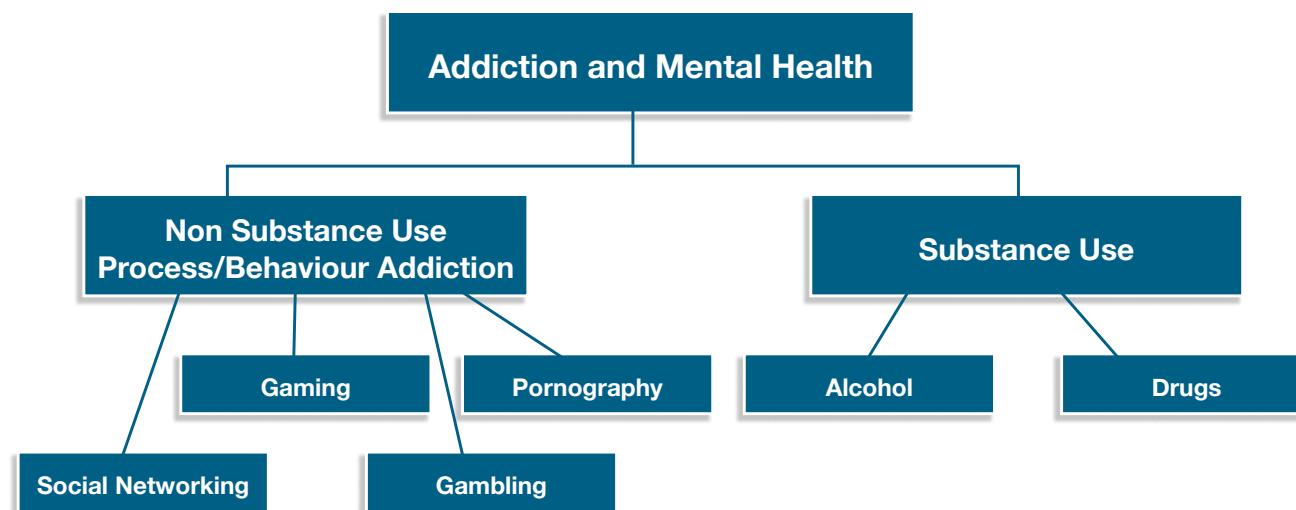
Pornography includes "the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement."⁹

Access, affordability, and anonymity of viewing sexually explicit material increases risk of addiction associated with the consumption of Internet pornography.^{10, 11, 12}

Compulsive pornography viewing may result in significant negative effects on a young person's life, including:

- Unrealistic, potentially harmful sexual values, beliefs, and attitudes
- Modeling and imitation of inappropriate, diverse, and aggressive sexual behaviors and practices^{11, 13, 14}
- Depressive symptoms, feelings of shame, guilt, and risk of poor social bonds as adults^{13, 14}
- Risk of drug and alcohol use while engaging in sexual encounters.¹¹

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND ADDICTION



CONTINUUM OF USE

BALANCED USE RISKY USE PROBLEMATIC EXCESSIVE PATHOLOGICAL USE

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"What I really feel is lacking, is education for children and youth about what is healthy when it comes to technology and when it is too much or unhealthy."

Sarah, age 20

"I don't know how many times I have stayed up past one or two a.m., gaming or watching videos. It is often difficult to remember to stop and pull the plug."

Theo, age 16

"I've noticed that I spent a lot of time on technology and social media in my teens and this sometimes took away from developing relationships with the people around me in person"

CAYAC Alumni, age 23

"We have become consumed by technology. The amount of time I waste on social media is disgusting."

"With every post, I see my life is affected."

Tessa, age 16

"I think that adults need to be realistic with their recommendations and realistic from a youth perspective."

Sarah, age 20

"Taking away a device will not teach a child proper behaviour, it will only make them more hostile to the situation."

CYFI Youth

CONCLUSION

Digital technology has become an integral part of the lives of children, youth, and their families. Repeated exposure to digital stimuli contributes to changes in the brain and limits the development of coping skills and responses to natural rewards.

The use of digital technology can be viewed on a continuum from balanced to problematic, excessive, or pathological use. Emerging research explores the addiction to behaviours or processes, and is called behavioural or process addiction. Pathological use of digital technology has many similarities to process addiction and warrants further investigation. This investigation is needed to understand the emotional, social, and legal impacts of social networking, gaming, gambling, and pornography on children, youth, and their families. Public education and policy development which utilizes trauma informed, culturally responsive, and a community health lens is needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Total abstinence from using the Internet is generally not the goal of treatment. There are several prevention and intervention strategies that can be implemented.

PREVENTION

- Limit screen time as per Canadian Paediatric Society guidelines.
- Include concepts of online safety and digital citizenship in the home, school, and workplace

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- When appropriate, use screening and assessment tools to determine continuum of use, along with evidence based treatment modalities
- Use a family-centred and trauma informed care approach
- Consider collateral information from family, school, and community
- Treatment approaches can include: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), motivational interviewing, addiction counseling
- Include information on finding healthy hobbies, physical activities, positive social interaction, and stress reduction techniques

