

## Is Internet Use Interfering with Youngsters' Well-being?\*

*When you spend more time on social media or playing games than you do interacting with real people, or you can't stop yourself from repeatedly checking texts, emails, news feeds, websites, or apps—even when it has negative consequences in your life—it may be time to reassess your technology use. (HelpGuide.org) <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/smartphone-and-internet-addiction.htm>*

*It seems clear that the Internet can be used and abused in a compulsive fashion, and that there are numerous psychological factors that contribute to the Internet's power and appeal. It appears that the very same features that drive the potency of the Net are potentially habit-forming. (David Greenfield) <http://virtual-addiction.com/>*

*Do some people have problems with spending too much time online? Sure they do. Some people also spend too much time reading, watching television, and working, and ignore family, friendships, and social activities. But do we have TV addiction disorder, book addiction, and work addiction being suggested as legitimate mental disorders in the same category as schizophrenia and depression? I think not. It's the tendency of some mental health professionals and researchers to want to label everything they see as potentially harmful with a new diagnostic category. Unfortunately, this causes more harm than it helps people. (John Grohol) <http://psychcentral.com/about/john-grohol/>*

Most people appreciate the benefits of devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. At the same time, there is widespread discussion, concern, and controversy about abuses and the negative effects of excessive use. Considerable concern focuses on what frequently is labeled “internet addiction” (often referred to as “PIU” – problematic/pathological internet use), especially with respect to game playing, texting, and sexual preoccupations.

Research on “internet addiction” remains plagued by definitional, conceptual and methodological problems. For example, a major conceptual confound is that the internet serves as a medium for many compulsive pursuits (e.g., gaming, online shopping, gambling, pornography and cybersex). In such instances, the specific pursuits rather than the internet per se, are the “addictions.”

Core methodological problems are that instruments used to gather data lack rigorous validation, and so do the criteria and standards used to interpret findings as indicating abuse and addiction.

### Some Descriptive Data on Use

Acknowledging methodological concerns, the Pew Research Center reports U.S. survey data suggesting that the widespread availability of mobile devices, especially smartphones, has led to 92% of teens (13 to 17) going online daily – including 24% who say they go online “almost constantly.” More than half (56%) go online several times a day; 12% report once-a-day use, 6% report weekly use, and 2% go online less often. The survey found that 88% have or have access to cell phones or smartphones, and 90% of those send and receive 30 texts a day. Among teens, 34% of African-Americans and 32% of Hispanics report going online “almost constantly;” 19% of whites go online that often. Of those with phones, 33% have messaging apps such as Kik, WhatsApp (47% of African-American, 46% of Hispanic; 24% of whites). More girls than boys tend to use visually-oriented social media; boys are more likely to own gaming consoles and play video games.

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\*The material in this document reflects work done by Runqiu Jin as part of her involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Indicators of Possible Overuse

Given the benefits, the question about negative effects revolves around how much internet involvement is harming individual and societal well-being (e.g., interfering with daily life, relationships, schooling). For example, “cyber psychologist” David Greenfield’s perspective is:

*Technology, and most especially, computers and the Internet, seem to be at best easily overused/abused, and at worst, addictive. The combination of available stimulating content, ease of access, convenience, low cost, visual stimulation, autonomy, and anonymity -- all contribute to a highly psychoactive experience. By psychoactive, that is to say mood altering, and potentially behaviorally impacting. In other words these technologies affect the manner in which we live and love. It is my contention that some of these effects are indeed less than positive, and may contribute to various negative psychological effects.*

In contrast, psychologist John Grohol states:

*Since the aspects of the Internet where people are spending the greatest amount of time online have to do with social interactions, it would appear that **socialization** is what makes the Internet so "addicting." That's right -- plain old hanging out with other people and talking with them. Whether it's via e-mail, a discussion forum, chat, or a game online (such as a MUD), people are spending this time exchanging information, support, and chit-chat with other people like themselves.*

*Would we ever characterize any time spent in the real world with friends as "addicting?" Of course not. Teenagers talk on the phone for hours on end, with people they see everyday! Do we say they are addicted to the telephone? Of course not. People lose hours at a time, immersed in a book, ignoring friends and family, and often not even picking up the phone when it rings. Do we say they are addicted to the book? Of course not.*

### A Student’s Concerns About the Problem of Internet Overuse

As noted, this Information Resource reflects a literature review on “internet addiction” done by Runqiu Jin as part of her involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Runqiu approached the task with an appreciation of the many benefits of the internet and the various devices for accessing it. She especially noted the expanded resources and ease of access now available to students and their teachers. However, she soon became concerned that these benefit can be offset by overuse. Her concern was heightened by the wide range of factors researchers report as associated with problematic internet use. For example, with respect to learning and performing at school, she noted the relationship of overuse to increased distractability, poor time management skills, how multitasking reduced the distribution of working memory for each task, emotional and sleep problems, and more.

In general, she found teenagers were described as victims of internet addiction and as experiencing social isolation, increased depression, familial discord, divorce, academic failure, financial debt and job loss. She noted particular concerns about the potential negative impact on personal alienation and interpersonal communication. She was struck by the research indicating that people feel most bonded with each other after talking face-to-face and least bonded after talking through instant messaging. Related to this she noted that language and facial expressions used are totally different when talking face-to-face as contrasted to on a screen. Thus, she concluded that overuse of social media may actually intensify feelings of isolation, loneliness, and even alienation for vulnerable children and adolescents. Despite this, such individuals tend not to reduce time on social media. Rather, the negative feelings seem to motivate seeking more online contacts in hopes of finding others who will make them feel liked, connected, and supported. This can become a vicious cycle that interferes with development and learning.

Because of the concern about overuse of devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones, lists of indicators are prominently circulated on the internet . Here is a synthesis of what often are referred to as “warning signs.” We follow the list with a cautionary note.

The individual is viewed as

- using the devices as a major defense mechanism against negative thoughts, feelings, problems, responsibilities
- being preoccupied with thoughts about previous and future use of devices
- having lost her/his sense of time (e.g., uses devices more than s/he intended and/or for a disproportionate amount of time)
- going online for purposes and at times that generally are considered inappropriate
- having online experiences that produce negative thoughts, feeling, behaviors (e.g., anxiety, guilt, shame, moodiness, irritability, restlessness, problems with interpersonal relationships and schooling, sleep disturbances, weight gain or loss; dropping out of other activities)
- lacking the ability to control use and this also produces negative thoughts, feeling, behaviors
- denying to self and/or lying to others about extent of use
- having withdrawal behavior and strong negative emotions when devices are unavailable

### Cautionary Note

While any of the above behaviors raises concern, the matter of how much concern and any conclusions about “addiction” depends on how many are validly assessed and how many are judged to be severe. It is important to understand that use of the above indicators amounts to conducting a *first-level screening*. This is what optometrists do when they ask you to read the lines on an eye chart. Screening data primarily are meant to sensitize responsible professionals. No one wants to ignore indicators of significant problems. At the same time, there is a need to guard against tendencies to see normal variations in student's development and behavior as problems.

First-level screening is expected to over-identify problems. That is, such screening usually is designed to identify many individuals who do not really have significant problems. These are called false positive errors. Such errors are supposed to be detected by in-depth follow-up assessments.

Because of the frequency of false positive errors, serious concerns arise when screening data are used to diagnose students and prescribe treatment. Concerns include overdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, misprescribing, and more. Many factors found to be symptoms of problems also are common characteristics of young people, especially in adolescence. This means extreme caution must be exercised to avoid misidentifying and inappropriately stigmatizing a youngster. Never overestimate the significance of a few indicators.

It is essential to remember that first-level screens do not allow for definitive statements about a student's problems and need. In considering a “diagnosis” of internet addiction and prescriptions for how to correct the problem, one needs data from well validated assessment procedures.

## What Leads to Overuse

Clearly, computers, tablets, and smartphones are embedded into most students' lives. And schools want to promote positive use, and they need to work against potential problems.

As frequency of use increases, it is essential to enhance understanding of why and how use becomes overuse and abuse. Here are a few thoughts about overuse:

Start by thinking in terms of both proactive and reactive reasons for use and potential overuse. Stated simply, there is considerable proactive attraction to the opportunities provided by the technology. Involvement is encouraged and modeled by significant others (e.g., peers, family, teachers). Social media enhances connectivity and can be used to garner social-emotional supports and attachments. Psychologically, use of the various devices often enhances feelings of pleasure, competence, self-determination, and relatedness to significant others.

In contrast, some individuals seem to use the technology as a reactive escape defense when facets of their life feel particularly stressful and unpleasant and no better alternatives for coping with circumstances are perceived. Personal characteristics also can play into this. For example, some students (e.g., those who are introverted and shy, those with poor social skills) may find it easier to relate to others on a social network than in face-to-face contacts.

Motivation for internet overuse may range from meeting simple needs and interests (e.g., distracting oneself, contacting a supportive friend) to complex compulsions (e.g., gambling and sexual addictions). Overuse is more likely when the internet is easily accessed and in the absence of attractive alternative ways to meet one's interests and needs. From a neuroscience perspective, researchers are studying how all this relates to central nervous system structures and functions.

## Schools Can Help Counter Overuse

Besides what we have highlighted, there, of course, are additional learning, behavior, and emotional problems that arise from overuse and other internet related experiences (e.g., cyberbullying, unsavory encounters, negative personal comparisons with others on social media platforms). Schools have a role to play in all this.

Currently, schools tend to teach internet use, with too little attention to addressing concerns about abuse and overuse. However, with the increasing political attention to internet downsides, special initiative projects are likely to emerge to deal with the concerns. It is essential to resist "project mentality." Projects exacerbate the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and overspecialization that characterizes efforts to address student problems.

Rather than pursuing yet another discrete set of interventions, it is essential for schools to use specific problem-focused initiatives as golden opportunities to catalyze and leverage systemic change. In particular, we suggest that the aim should be to take the next step toward transforming student and learning supports. This means proceeding in ways that embed all separate initiatives into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports so that each school can address a broad range barriers to student learning effectively.\*

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\*For details about a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports*, see

>ESSA, *Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf>

>*Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tinkering.pdf>

>All this is discussed in detail in a new book that is in press entitled: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. For a preview look, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Addressing the Problems as Part of a Student and Learning Supports System

In developing the learning supports system, include plans to

- enhance staff, student, and family awareness and understanding of internet use and abuse
- make institutional/environmental changes that can reduce problem use (e.g., supporting appropriate use, working with students to establish guidelines and as necessary rules for using devices at school, providing attractive alternative activities to counter overuse)
- embed a focus on social and emotional learning and moral development (e.g., knowledge, skills, *and attitudes*) related to use of technology into appropriate facets of curricula
- use natural opportunities to enhance knowledge, skills, *and attitudes* about use of technology
- provide peer mentoring for appropriate use of technology
- call on and enable all school personnel to play a role in modeling appropriate use of devices and explaining, monitoring, and enforcing behavior expectations and consequences for misuses
- inform parents of how to model appropriate use and explain, monitor, and enforce behavior expectations and consequences for misuses
- engage students and families when serious misuse occurs at school
- account for legalities (e.g., investigating and reporting incidents such as cyberbullying)
- provide intensive special assistance (including counseling when needed) for individuals who manifest chronic and severe problems related to using the internet

## Concluding Comments

Technological devices are tools. They can benefit and they can harm.

Concern about internet overuse is wise. Providing guidance, support, and attractive alternatives is essential. So is caution about prematurely declaring a youngster as internet “addicted.”

Given how fast technology is changing the world, the a primary focus needs to be on ensuring the well-being of children and our society by facilitating the benefits and minimizing harm.





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- For more general information and resources on technology in schools, see our online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Technology as an Intervention Tool* –  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/techschool.htm>
- For more about “Internet Addiction,” go to the Psych Central website –  
<http://psychcentral.com/cgi-bin/dir/search.cgi?query=internet+addiction&x=0&y=0>