

## Concerns about Media Use Among Children and Adolescents

Media has positive and negative aspects. A particularly widespread concern is that extensive interaction with the Internet can pull children and adolescents into an online world that fosters problems not only for them, but for schools and society.

**T**echnology, especially the Internet and social media, has and continues to raise profound concerns. More and more young people are online, with social media use beginning at younger and younger ages.

The general pros and cons for society related to the Internet have been discussed widely (e.g., <https://helpfulprofessor.com/pros-and-cons-of-the-internet/>). Here we highlight concerns for schools.

### Why Should Schools be Concerned?

Positive learning and growth is shaped through physical activity and emotional engagement in an environment that promotes healthy development. Researchers have cautioned that too much screen time not only reduces physical activity, but also interferes with important in-person family and peer interactions.

Early media usage has been linked to decreased cognition, language, and social-emotional skills. As Schwarzer and colleagues (2022) state, "Screens displace opportunities for children to communicate, interact, play, and therefore to learn." High media use and excess levels of screen time are associated with "lower psychological well-being and mental health issues in school-aged children and adolescents ... [and] conduct problems, hyperactivity, and inattention later in life."

### Effects of High Media Use Seen in Schools

Media use at schools is increasing at an exponential rate. This is mostly a positive and certainly inevitable trend. The concern is that excessive media use can have significant negative effects.

Much of the Internet, for example, is designed for instant access to an abundance of information. It encompasses constant, rapid, and novel stimuli intended to captivate users. This has led to the Internet being described as "an instant gratification medium" because users rapidly seek immediate satisfaction (Meade, 2012). Learning at school, of course, requires delaying gratification and maintaining attention in the absence of immediate satisfaction.

Tobin and Graziano (2010) define delay of gratification as "a set of motivational and cognitive processes related to choice of a later or more distant goal at the expense of an immediate goal". As Meade (2012) emphasizes, a great deal of what must be learned at school involves a demanding and long-term process, much of which doesn't produce immediate feelings of gratification. Numerous studies report correlations between difficulty in delaying gratification and learning and behavior problems.

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## Looking Specifically at Social Media

Particular concerns have arisen about social media use. While social networks provide opportunities for social connections and interchange, they also are associated with increases in problems among youngsters, especially among heavy users (Champion, 2023; The Data Team, 2018; Mingoia et al., 2017; Sample, 2022). Examples include sleep deprivation, cyberbullying, distorted ideas about body image and related eating disorders, fear of missing out (“FOMO”), increased anxiety and negative feelings about self and others, and exposure to unrealistic life-style and risky and unhealthy behaviors that then are pursued. Increasingly, alarms have been sounded not only about the detrimental impact on user development, but on schools, and society at large.

### Internet Gaming Disorder: An Growing Concern

A few years ago Daniel Fu working with our Center staff provided *A Look at Gaming Culture and Gaming Related Problems: From a Gamer’s Perspective*. In the report, he noted that:

Hard core gamers become addicted to games when it becomes a lifestyle consuming every aspect of their life. ... In 2014, Internet gaming disorder was added to the research appendix of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Revision (DSM-5) as the only non-substance addiction (Petry et al., 2014). In 2018, gaming disorder was also recognized by the World Health Organization as a mental illness and has since been added to the 11th revision of International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).

Gaming disorder is defined as behavior “characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences” (World Health Organization, 2018). Petry, et al. (2014) state that, unlike general internet addiction, gaming disorder clearly shows an increase in risk for clinically significant issues. It has been associated with food and sleep deprivation, seizures, and even death among youths. Another study concluded that online gamers who played for more than five hours on a weekday had increased depressive symptoms, musculoskeletal symptoms (e.g. shoulder, back, and hand pain), and psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. headache, feelings of nervousness, irritation, and sleep problems) (Hellström et al., 2015).

Prevalence estimates vary. A 2016 report a high: 8.5% of US youth 8 to 18 years of age were reported as meeting criteria for Internet gaming disorder. Particular concern has been raised about aggressive, violently themed games (Rogers, 2018). And research suggests that some youngsters classified as pathological gamers turned to games because of family conflict, neglect, or abuse (Charlie et al., 2011).

### What’s Recommended to Counter the Problems

While much of the literature focuses on parental policing and monitoring of child media use, clearly some of the recommended strategies can be used at schools (Nikken, 2015). For instance, in a study by Livingstone and Helsper (2008), the main strategies parents reported using were restrictive mediation (e.g., implementing restrictions on time and content), active mediation (e.g., having open conversations and instructions with the child to enhance safety, raise critical awareness, stimulate learning outcomes), co-using the media, directly supervising use, and monitoring online activities afterward. And a Pew Research Center survey (2020) reported the following strategies employed by parents trying to control excess media use and keep use as healthy as possible: limiting the amount of time spent online, taking away the child's Internet privileges as a punishment, checking the website

the child engages with, using parental controls to restrict the child's screen time, being involved in following the child's social media accounts, and tracking their child through a GPS software.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) has developed recommendations for healthy screen time including development of a **Media Use Plan**. Other than video-chatting, their recommendations emphasize introducing screen media at an age appropriate time (not before 18 to 24 months of age), always choosing high-quality programming, co-participation, and monitoring content. The Academy also stresses limiting media time (e.g., 1 hour or less per day for 2 to 5 years olds), with no screens during meals and for 1 hour before bedtime. To enhance media experiences, the advice is to help children understand what they are seeing and then apply what they learn to the world around them. Cautions are given about turning off televisions and other devices when not in use and avoiding the use of media as the primary way of calming children.

Schools have embraced the Internet. Now, they need to create a digital environment that maximizes positive and minimizes negative outcomes. From pre-school on, this includes shaping students' relationship with technology and playing a role in teaching parents how to help their children use media effectively, appropriately, and with care. Schools can also provide regular updates on quality apps, encourage discussion of the risks associated with excessive media use, highlight ways to set healthy boundaries and habits related to Internet use and ways to counter problems that arise, and encourage "digital detox" times and events.

Technology also has a role to play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. For more on this, see the Center's Quick Finds entitled *Technology as an Intervention Tool* and *MH Related Software and Media*.

### Concluding Comments

Media use has accelerated at a breath taking pace and has become a major influence in youngster's lives. As Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Donahu noted over a decade ago in *Children and Electronic Media* (a special issue of the *Futures of Children*):

Media use in the schools is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, media technology can be used as a powerful teaching tool; ... On the other hand, teachers must have tools to manage the private use of electronic media in schools, ranging from such innocuous interference with learning as text-messaging during class to more harmful uses such as bullying or cheating. ... The pervasiveness of electronic media in the lives of children makes it important for policymakers, educators, parents, and advocates to know what researchers have discovered, as well as what questions remain unanswered.

Unfortunately, as with so many problems confronting society, more attention has been directed to date at highlighting concerns than finding effective ways to redress them.

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