

Is Internet Addiction Real?

 childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real

With kids spending more and more time on screens, parents worry that they are getting hooked

Writer: Caroline Miller

Clinical Experts: Dave Anderson, PhD , Matthew Cruger, PhD

Internet addiction. Phone addiction. Technology addiction. Whatever you call it, a lot of parents are expressing worries that their children are addicted to their devices.

Is the behavior that parents are concerned about really addiction?

What parents are alarmed about is usually two things: the sheer amount of time their kids spend on screens, and their kids' resistance to cutting back on that screen time. Getting them to put away their devices and come to dinner, engage in other activities, go outside or do their homework (without also checking social media and streaming TV shows) seems to be an increasingly uphill battle.

Kids sometimes use the word "addiction" to describe their own behavior, too. In a 2016 survey by Common Sense Media, half of teenagers said they "feel" they're addicted to their mobile device. Three quarters of them said they felt compelled to immediately respond to texts, social media posts and other notifications.

"More often than not, when people say that someone is addicted to the internet or addicted to their phone, they're using it colloquially," notes David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. By calling it addiction, parents are often communicating their concern that so much screen time is unhealthy, as well as their feeling that they're powerless to stop it.

Are kids addicted?

While the comparison to *substance abuse*

is tempting, because devices are stimulating to the same reward centers of the brain, experts point out crucial differences.

“Addiction doesn’t really capture the behavior we’re seeing,” says Matthew Cruger, PhD, a neuropsychologist and the director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute. “With addiction you have a chemical that changes the way we respond, that leads us to be reliant on it for our level of functioning. That’s not what’s happening here. We don’t develop higher levels of tolerance. We don’t need more and more screen time in order to be able to function.”

There is, technically, no such thing as internet or phone addiction. Some in the psychiatric community have proposed a new disorder called internet gaming disorder, to recognize unhealthy patterns of game-playing. But to rise to the level of a disorder, Dr. Anderson notes, the behavior would be very extreme, and seriously impairing to a child’s life.

That would mean an amount of screen time that’s not only more than parents feel comfortable with, but that crowds out other age-appropriate activities, like socializing, sports, school work — even hygiene and sleep. “We would be looking at adolescents who are pushing everything else out of their lives,” explains Dr. Anderson. “They are not having friendships, not engaging socially — at least offline — and they may be failing in school.”

Some parents may see addict-like behavior, Dr. Anderson adds, when kids get angry if they’re required to stop, insist on more and more screen time, spend a lot of offline time thinking about how and when they will get back online. But these kind of behaviors can be prompted by many pleasurable activities, and don’t constitute an addiction. “More often than not, what I see are parents who are concerned about their teenager’s behavior around screens use the word addiction when it doesn’t really fit.”

One reason to be cautious about using the term, he added, “is that we have a tendency right now within the zeitgeist to pathologize normal adolescent behavior.”

What are kids doing online?

The amount of time teenagers typically spend on phones and other devices can be misleading as a measure of whether they are unhealthily engaged. That’s because many of the things kids do on those devices are age-appropriate activities that in the past have been done offline: socializing with peers, exploring personal interests, shopping, listening to music, doing schoolwork, watching movies or TV.

Texting and use of social media sites, for instance, have become important channels for adolescents connecting to others and being validated. Role-playing games allow kids to interact not only with friends, but to people around the world. A 2016 report by

Common Sense Media concluded: “What looks like excessive use and distraction is actually a reflection of new ways of maintaining peer relations and engaging in communities that are relevant to them.”

Is it masking a mental health disorder?

When a child seems unhealthily focused on video games, to the point of social isolation, the behavior may be, rather than addiction, a product of other mental health problems.

Dr. Anderson reports that he finds himself saying to parents, “We understand your hypothesis that your kid is addicted to games, but it may be that he is socially anxious. It may be that he is depressed. It may be that he has *a learning disorder*.

”

Dr. Anderson recalls treating a 16-year-old whose mother was adamant that he was addicted to video games. “I was doing in-home sessions with him, and it was, indeed, very hard to get him off playing Call of Duty to even have the session. But what I realized very quickly was that he had both ADHD and depression, and he had been failing school for as long as he could remember.”

Call of Duty was actually a positive in his life, Dr. Anderson said, “the only thing that provided solace, a sense of belonging. He had joined a crew of people who play Call of Duty and post YouTube videos of them playing.”

Once his ADHD

and depression got appropriate treatment, he was able to cut back on Call of Duty, and make offline friends. “He joined the football team at school. His grades improved,” said Dr. Anderson. “In that sense, it was treatment of ‘internet addiction’ through treatment of the actual underlying conditions.”

Problematic use

While experts say that parents should remain skeptical of the notion of addiction, they also argue that parents should be alert for potential negative fallout from screen use. Apps and games are designed to keep us engaged as much as possible, and it can be hard for children to exercise self-control when their impulse is to keep scrolling.

There is ample evidence that intense social media use is correlated with an increase in anxiety and depression as teenagers, especially girls, compare themselves unfavorably to their peers and worry about missing out.

Research shows that excessive gaming — spending two-thirds or more of free time — is correlated with negative mental health outcomes, including higher incidence of anxiety, depression and substance use.

There is evidence that multitasking — using social media, texting, watching tv while doing homework — underminescognitive

functioning and decreases learning.

And, of course, experts note constant attention to devices comes at the cost of other activities that are ultimately more valuable, and developmentally important.

Superficial engagement

“Our brains are hardwired to like things that are novel and stimulating, and the phone captures that,” notes Dr. Cruger. “It’s easier to engage in constantly checking your phone or playing a game than tasks that require more mental effort, though those are ultimately more rewarding for a lot of people.”

Dr. Cruger sees an analogy to gambling in that checking devices is only intermittently reinforcing. “People spend a lot of time looking briefly at things, not diving down, hoping it’s going to be rewarding, though often it’s not.”

Why would you pick up a book if you’re stimulated by Instagram or Candy Crush, Dr. Cruger asks. “You still retain the capacity to apply more mental effort to things but the opportunity is lost when you’re constantly superficially engaged.”

“There are absolutely alarms to be sounded,” concludes Dr. Anderson, “but the vast majority of kids are engaging in screen-related behaviors that may not be either pathological or damaging.”

The key, he notes, is to help parents set appropriate boundaries around screens, to understand what their kids are doing online, to feel confident that they are is engaging in the right*developmental*

tasks — online or off.

Support Children's Mental Health

How you can aid our efforts to improve care, education, and science

Ways to Donate

This article was last reviewed or updated on August 19, 2021.