CPYU'S DIGITAL KIDS INITIATIVE

A PARENTS' PRIMER ON ELECTRONIC ADDICTION

By Walt Mueller

Introduction

We live in a culture where addictions are widespread. Not a day goes by without us hearing about and being reminded of lives ravaged and destroyed by addictions to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sex and pornography. In recent years, the growing catalog of addictions includes things like self-mutilation, tattoos, body-piercing, food, shopping and fame. Now, the advent and rapid expansion of technology is forcing us to look more seriously at addiction to video gaming, the Internet, text-messaging, social networking and other developing media platforms. Because both we and our kids are immersed in life on the emerging Digital Frontier, we must work to understand, prevent and respond to the dangers associated with electronic addiction.

Addiction is best understood as the dependency and habitual use of something that we eventually believe we can't live without. An *addiction* is characterized by an uncontrollable and compulsive use of that thing which eventually (and sometimes very quickly!) has negative health and/or social consequences. My friends Rich Van Pelt and Jim Hancock describe *addiction* as "a compulsive craving, seeking, and using . . . no matter what" (*The Youth Worker's Guide to Helping Teenagers in Crisis*, 203). Based on these criteria, many of us know and/or are related to persons (perhaps even ourselves!) who are addicted to technology.

Researchers and counselors are currently debating whether or not there is such a thing as "Internet Addiction." Many are campaigning to have "Internet Addiction" included as a diagnosable disorder in the upcoming *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-V*, which will be released in 2013.

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As parents called by God to nurture our children through childhood and into a spiritually healthy adulthood, we have the responsibility to be keenly aware of and sensitive to electronic addiction in all of its forms. We must understand its threat, presence and impact. Consequently, we must be diligent in preparing both ourselves and our children to understand, process and live with electronic media in ways that bring honor and glory to God.

At the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (cpyu. org), our Digital Kids Initiative is a resource to help you help your children navigate the Digital Frontier in God-honoring ways. We believe that parental awareness and understanding are a first step towards crafting healthy and proactive parental responses. Your children *are* engaging with electronic media. What follows is an introduction to electronic addiction that we trust you will find helpful as you lead them through this dangerous and ever-present minefield.

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Overview

- *A growing number of children, teens and adults are spending far too much time, energy and money engaged with and related to technology*

- *13.7% of adults find it hard to stay away from the Internet for a few days*

- *12.3% of adults feel a need to cut back on Internet usage*

- *8.7% of adults conceal non-essential Internet use from family and friends*

- *5.9% of relationships suffer as a result of excessive Internet use*

- *1 in 8 individuals show signs of problematic Internet use*

- *Males are more prone to be addicted to online gambling, pornography and games*

- *Woman are more prone to be addicted to chatting, instant messaging and online shopping*

- *Some health professionals are sounding the alarm that Internet Addiction might become the most pressing childhood disease/health issue*

- *While the research is still in its early stages, it is estimated that anywhere from 1.4% to 17.9% of adolescents are addicted to the Internet*

- *37% of teens say they feel they wouldn't be able to live without a cellphone once they had it*

- *The Internet Addiction rate among 7th graders in Taiwan is 10.8%*

Types of Electronic Addiction

Health professionals currently identify several subtypes of Electronic Addiction, including:

- *Excessive gaming*

- *Sexual preoccupations and cyber-sex*

- *Social networking and cyber-relationship addiction*

- *Information overload and compulsive surfing*

- *Shopping*

- *Gambling*

- *Email/instant messaging/text messaging/status updating*

> *Electronic Addiction can be associated with other dangerous behaviors including substance abuse, depression and stress.*

- *Isolating ones' self socially and arguing or lying when confronted or questioned by family/friends*

- *Feeling none of your real-life relations understand you as well as your online/ virtual friends*

- *Spending more time with technology and social media than with family and real-world friends*

- *Excessive posting about personal activities and minutia*

- *Escaping into technology and social media to avoid problems and relationships*

Signs of Electronic Addiction

The following is a list of some of the more prevalent and obvious signs of Electronic Addiction:

- *Can't stop using it, or feeling uneasy/incomplete/ agitated when digital activity is discontinued or reduced*

- *The activity becomes the most important activity in life, dominating one's thinking, feelings and behavior*

- *Losing track of time while online*

- *Avoiding and neglecting basic physical needs to eat, sleep, shower, etc.*

- *Usage effects school and work performance*

- *Need to be engaged more frequently for increased amounts of time to gain desired effect*

Dangerous Behaviors

Electronic Addiction can be associated with other dangerous behaviors, including:

- *Substance abuse*

- *Sexual activity*

- *Absenteeism*

- *Fighting*

- *Lack of sleep*

- *Poor academic performance*

- *Physical issues, including musculoskeletal disorders (too much texting), weight gain and severe headaches*

- *Depression*

- *Mental health problems*

- *Stress*

- *Suicide*

- *Parental permissiveness*

Diagnosing Electronic Addiction

Asking and answering these questions can help determine if you or someone you love might have a problem with Electronic Addiction:

- *Do you feel better when you are online or using technology?*

- *Do you find yourself spending increased amounts of time engaged with technology?*

- *Do you get irritated or agitated when you are not engaged with technology?*

- *Are you engaging with technology at the expense of other relationships?*

- *Do you own your technology, or does your technology own you?*

- *When you are not engaged with technology, do you find yourself thinking about and looking forward to your next electronic experience?*

- *What does your spouse/friends/family members say when you ask them this question: "Do you think I have a problem?"*

- *Have you tried to cut back and can't?*

Electronic Addiction Intervention Steps

If you, your child or someone you know is struggling with Electronic Addiction, here are some initial steps to take to deal with the problem:

- *Confront the problem*

- *Set limits and remove temptations*

- *Monitor computer/device use*

- *Schedule more face-to-face time with family and friends*

- *Replace online time with other activities and hobbies that are enjoyable and that involve social interaction with real flesh-and-blood relatives and friends*

- *Limit your cell-phone use to phone calls only*

- *Install filtering or accountability software on your computer and mobile devices*

- *Enlist the help of a trusted accountability partner to monitor your use*

- *Get help by enlisting the services of a qualified Christian counselor to deal with underlying spiritual/relational/emotional issues that have caused and/or resulted from your Electronic Addiction*

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For additional information on the digital world of kids, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding's Digital Kids Initiative at *digitalkidsinitiative.com*.