HANDLING CHILDREN AND YOUTH INTERNET ADDICTION

A parent's evidence-based guide

It is not uncommon that some youth spend their entire day and night playing games, searching blogs and youtube, and being involved in different social media platforms. Do they suffer from internet addiction? They might spend too much time at home or in LAN cafe, becoming more sedentary and socially reclusive. Sometimes neglecting their homework and they might fail to build up social connection with the reality.

In these 5 years, there are different researches and clinical practice indicates that Internet Addiction in adolescence can have a negative impact on identity formation (Kim, et al., 2012) and change the structure of the developing brain (Lin et at.,2012; Yuan et. Al., 2011). In addition to this, it may negatively affect cognitive functioning (Park et al.,2011), leading to poor academic performance, engagement in risky activities (Tsitsika et al., 2011) , and low quality of interpersonal relations (Milani, Osualdella,& Di Blasio, 2009) From the reported negative consequences, it appears that Internet addiction can have a variety of detrimental psychosocial and physical outcomes for adolescents that may require professional intervention.

What is online gaming?

An online game is a video game played over some form of computer network. This network is usually the internet or equivalent technology. Online platform is the easiest way to find multi-players all over the world, there is no limitation of time and locality. The increasing prevalence of high-speed Internet connections has even made online gaming practical for more young people in recent years.

What is internet addiction?

There are three basic factors to consider, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms and tolerance (Young, 1998) before we can ascertain that the youth have some form of Internet addiction.

Preoccupation

- The youth's mind is constantly thinking of what he / she will be going to do online later while he / she is still in school.

Withdrawal Symptoms

- The youth tends to throw tantrums and exhibit violent behaviours not normally seen in other circumstances.

Tolerance

- Tolerance may develop as youth play game repeatedly over time. Youth have to spend considerably longer time online to feel the same level of satisfaction as before.

Erikson's psychosocial stages for youth - Identity versus Role Confusion

Youth between the ages of 13 – 19 years old go through a stage known as "Identity versus Role Confusion" (Erikson, 1963). This theory was expounded upon into "Group: Identity versus Alienation" and "Individual: Identity versus Identity Confusion". (Newman & Newman, 2000)

Most of the popular online games are termed as Massively Multi Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) where the youth form teams or online guilds in order to play. As such, it is quite common for them to band together in the offline world to discuss about the game. If the youth does not play similar games with their friends, they tend to feel left out of during their conversations or cliques. Therefore, in order for the youth to establish a sense of belonging and acceptance with their friends, they would invest more time and energy in the online games.

The online world is also another viable option for the youth to seek out their self-identity. They may use the Internet as a platform to establish a sense of self (Erikson, 1963) and experiment with different roles and behaviours. Hence it is through this phase which shapes the youth's identity which last into their later years.

Research has also shown that our brain matter, the prefrontal cortex, which controls our decision making and social behaviour amid some other functions only fully matures after the child turns 20 years of age. (Lin et at.,2012; Yuan et. Al., 2011). Hence, it is at this stage where parents should provide guidance and help their children on decision-making and social behavioural skills.

Struggles of parents …

Having children who are addicted to the Internet can be very stressful. The parents have tried to restraint their children's time spent playing online games, but for one reason or another, nothing has worked. They often are frustrated, stressed, scared, angry, and/or depressed. They have no energy left and they just want to give up. Some struggles that they may face are shown as below:

Self-Blaming

- Parents may have the tendency for self-blaming for not doing enough with their children and for allowing them to be addicted to the Internet.

Anger

- Parents may display acts of anger such as snatching away the gadgets, abruptly turning off the home WIFI connection, verbal or/and physical abuse. In extreme

cases, they might resort to changing locks at home and withholding the keys in an attempt to keep the children at home.

Helplessness and fatigue

- In certain situations, parents are left in a state where they feel helpless and fatigue after all their efforts come to naught. In such circumstances, parents may feel demoralized and feel at loss without knowing what actions to take next.

Anxiety

- Seeing their children in the addiction phase can also be quite daunting for parents. They may try a number of actions without considering the consequences but with the same end goal in mind and that is to attempt to break their children's addiction cycle.

Denial

- It may also happen whereby some parents totally deny and disregard the existence of Internet Addiction on their children and attempt to lead lives as normal as possible.

Tips for parents …

- Limit the amount of gaming time and control of any online purchases made.
- Place gaming system in a common area
- Understand the nature of their games, get into their world
- Communicate with your children about their roles in the games and identify their strengths. Affirm their strengths and encourage them to apply them in the offline world.
- Show your love, care and concern
- Spend quality time on interacting with children. Plan and do activities together as a family.
- Build interest and skills in other activities. Encourage your children to exercise and stay engaged in school activities.
- Understand personal tolerance level and calm down before doing anything which you may regret.
- Identify the early warning signs of internet addiction
- Attend METOYOU's Parents' Workshops / mutual support group work to understand more about the effects and function of gaming
- Be a volunteer with METOYOU

Resources and helplines

- **METOYOU:** Email: contact@metoyou.org.sg / Contact: 9173 1766
- **@27 Family Service Centre :** Email: contact@27fsc.org.sg / Contact: 6270 8327
- **Dr Kimberly Young's Internet Addiction Test:** http://netaddiction.com/internet-addiction-test/

References:

Demetrovics, Z., Urban, R., Nagygyorgy, K., Farkas, J., Zilahy, D., Mervo, B., Reindl, A., Agoston, C., Kertesz, A., & Harmath, E. (2011). Why do you play? The development of motives for online gaming questionnaire (MOGQ). *Behavioural Research, 43*, 814-825.

Erikson E. (1963) Childhood and Society (2nd Ed). New York: W. W. Norton Kim,Y., Park,J.Y., Kim,S.B., Jung,I.K., Lim,Y.S., & Kim,J.H. (2010). The effects of Internet addiction on the lifestyle and dietary behaviour of Korean adolescents. *Nutrition Research and Practice,* 4(1),51-57.

Kim,Y.R., Son,J.W., Lee,S.I., Shin,C.J., Kim, S.K., Ju,G.et al. (2012). Abnormal brain activation of adolescent Internet addict in a ball-throwing animation task: Possible neural correlates of disembodiment revealed by fmri. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological psychiatry*, 39(1). 88-95.

Lin,F., Zhou,Y., Du, Y., Qin,L., Zhao,Z., Xu,J. et al (2012). Abnormal white matter integrity in adolescents with Internet addiction disorder: A tract- based spatial statistics study. *PloS ONE*, 7(1).

Milani, L., Osualdella,D., & Di Blasio, P. (2009). Quality of interpersonal relationships and problematic Internet use in adolescence. *Cyber Psychology & Behaviour*. 12(6) 681-684.

Newman B.M. & Newman P.R. (2009) Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach, Tenth Edition. *Chapter 9 Early Adolescence.* USA: Belmont. 239

Park, M.H., Park,E.J., Choi,J., Chai,S., Lee,J.H., Lee,C., et al. (2011). Preliminary study of Internet addiction and cognitive function in adolescents based on IQ tests. *Psychiatry Research*, 190(2-3), 275-281

Young K.S. (1998) Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment. *Clinical Assessment of Internet-Addicted Clients.* Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. 22 - 23