# Electronic Addiction

# What Are the Warning Signs?

- Tolerance — Needing to play more and more in order to experience the same "rush."
- Obsession — Spending most offline time thinking about past online experiences and planning for future online sessions.
- Frustration, anxiety, and/or irritability when not able to go online.
- Abandoning friends and other hobbies in order to focus on online activities.
- Continuing to spend time online even after negative repercussions (such as school problems, deteriorating relationships, and even health problems).

The following are among the specific signs that could indicate the presence of youth Internet addiction:

- Most non-school hours are spent on the computer or playing video games.
- Falling asleep in school.
- Falling behind with assignments; worsening grades.
- Lying about computer or video game use.
- Choosing to use the computer or play video games, rather than see friends.
- Dropping out of other social groups (clubs or sports).
- Being irritable when not playing a video game or being on the computer.

Physical symptoms associated with teen Internet addiction may include the following:

- Carpal tunnel syndrome (associated with repetitive motions such as excessive keyboard use)
- Insomnia
- Headaches, back pain, and neck pain
- Dry eyes and vision problems

- Poor nutrition and personal hygiene (failing or refusing to eat or clean in order to remain online)

# What Can Parents Do?

## Address the problem:

In a two-parent household, it is critical both parents present a united front. Discuss the situation together, come up with a plan you both agree on, and jointly explain your plan to your child. If you do not, your child will appeal to the more skeptical parent and create division between you. Remember, the goal is to decrease the negative behavior, not to get side tracked over which of you are right or wrong. If you're not sure how to respond, you might consider getting input from other trusted adults (i.e., friends, teachers, or a professional counselor).

In a single-parent household, the parent needs to take some time to think about what needs to be said and to prepare for the likely emotional response from the child. A child who is addicted to the Internet/electronics will feel threatened at the very idea of curbing computer time. A single parent needs to be prepared for an emotional outburst laden with accusatory phrases designed to make the parent feel guilty or inadequate. It is important not to respond to the emotion—or worse yet, get sidetracked with a lecture on disrespect. Acknowledge your child's feelings, but stay focused on the topic of his or her electronics use.

## Show you care:

It will help to begin your discussion by reminding your child that you love him or her and that you care about his or her happiness and well-being. Youth often interpret questions about their behavior as blame and criticism. You need to reassure your child that you are not condemning him or her. Rather say, you are concerned about some of the changes you have seen in his or her behavior. Refer to those changes in specific terms: fatigue, declining grades, giving up hobbies, not spending time with friends, isolating from family,

anger, etc. Making negative comments about online behavior is not often helpful. Instead, focus the importance of living a life of "balance." Take a moment to explain what a "balanced life" looks like (i.e., It's not healthy to "play or work all the time."). Assign an Internet time log—tell your youth you would like to see an accounting of just how much time is spent online each day and which Internet activities he or she is engaged in.

Remind your youth that with television you can monitor his or her viewing habits more easily, but with the Internet you need help and cooperation to become appropriately involved. Put your child on the honor system to keep the log for a week or two to build trust between you. If he or she balks at this idea or clearly lies in the log, you are likely dealing with his or her denial of addiction.

### Become more computer-savvy:
Checking history folders and Internet logs, learning about monitoring software, and installing filters all require a degree of computer savvy. It is important for every parent to be comfortable with the computer, at least enough to know what your child is doing online. Take an active interest in the Internet and learn about where your child goes online.

### Set reasonable rules:
Many parents get angry when they see the signs of electronic/Internet addiction in their child and take the source away as a form of punishment. Others become frightened and force their child to quit cold turkey, believing that is the only way to get rid of the problem. Both approaches invite trouble– your child will internalize the message that he or she is bad and look at you as the enemy instead of an ally. Instead, work with your child to establish clear boundaries for limited Internet usage. Allow perhaps an hour per night after homework, with a few extra weekend hours. Stick to your rules and remember that you're not simply trying to control him or her - you are working to free your youth of a psychological dependence.

# Causes of Electronic/Internet Addiction

As is also the case with other addictions and compulsions, youth electronic/Internet addiction is thought to be more prevalent among teens who are also struggling with disorders such as depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, poor self-image, and low self-esteem.

For youth who become enamored with online MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games) such as World of Warcraft and Everquest, the likelihood of addiction may be greater, because these games never end.

It's no surprise that kids of all ages can get addicted to their electronic toys. Every text that a kid sends or receives, every Facebook "like," and every point scored during a video game triggers a release of endorphins (brain chemicals associated with pleasure) that mimics what occurs in the brains of individuals who are addicted to alcohol and other drugs, or to behaviors such as gambling.

For some kids, playing with electronic toys isn't just a part of life. It's the only thing in life. In fact, child psychologists are reporting more and more cases of electronic "addiction" in teens, children, and even toddlers.

These young addicts include 3-year-olds who scream when they can't have their tablets, middle-schoolers whose grades nose-dive, because they can't quit texting or posting on Facebook, and high-schoolers who compulsively play online games. What's more, heavy exposure to TV or other rapid-paced media may rewire kids' brains to crave constant stimulation. So over time, it can get harder and harder for them to enjoy slower-paced activities like reading. For many kids, real life is a bore while virtual life is a high.

## How serious a problem is electronic addiction? Consider these statistics:

- Female college students spend an average of 10 hours a day on their cell phones. Guys in college spend nearly eight hours on their phones.

- Children ages 8 to 18 spend more than seven hours a day with mobile or online media.

- Kids are exposed to an average of four hours of TV a day, and many children watch TV from the time they get home until they go to bed.

- Research suggests that between two and ten percent of children who play video games are addicted to them.

- Parents are now paying thousands of dollars for "digital detox" programs for kids who refuse to turn off their devices.

- Kids who get addicted to electronics pay a high price. This habit does more than hurt their grades; it can also make them sick. Children who are addicted to video games are more likely to gain weight and feel depressed or anxious. And heavy TV and computer use puts kids at risk for metabolic syndrome, the first step toward diabetes.

**FRISCO**
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Student Services-Guidance and Counseling
469-633-6583
www.friscoisd.org

Materials taken from:

- www.*netsmartz.org*
- *www.crchealth.com*
- *www.webroot.com*