

IS YOUR TEEN ADDICTED TO THE INTERNET?

The Internet is a digital canvas that is accessed by nearly everyone with a computer. This broad range of online access brings great benefits . . . And potential dangers.

The Internet delivers massive volumes of information, images, and messages at high speeds. Some of this content can be highly addictive, and when online access is unrestrained, the Internet can become a tool that accelerates addiction.

For instance, one common Internet addiction is online gambling. While gambling addiction is a well-known problem, the Internet delivers virtually every form of gambling into the privacy of our homes. People who wouldn't have otherwise found themselves in a casino now have the casino delivered to them. Other potential dangers include online gaming, workaholism and compulsive shopping . . . And yes, pornography. Teens who wouldn't otherwise have free and easy access to obscene materials are now the largest group of Internet porn viewers.

So how can Parents know if their teens are developing an Internet addiction?

- Does your teen crave more and more time online? An increased amount of time spent on the computer may indicate a problem.
- Have you walked in on your teen with the monitor turned away from the door? When you come close to the computer, does your teen quickly shift or close whatever was visible on the screen or turn the monitor off completely? Is the door to the computer room frequently locked? An atmosphere of privacy around Internet use is a red flag.
- Is your teen defensive and protective about time spent online? Are you met with anger or frustration when you confront your teen about the amount of time spent online?
- Is your teen neglecting time spent with family, friends, chores, or school work?
- Have you noticed personality changes? Is your teen irritable until he or she gets online? Does your teen seem to have a sense of "well-being" only while spending time on the computer? Is your teen restless, moody, or depressed if Internet use is cut short? Internet addictions have an insidious way of engulfing people emotionally.
- Is there a change in sleep patterns? Have you ever caught your teen on the computer late at night or early in the morning? In some homes the largest amount of free time to use the Internet is frequently at night.
- Have you noticed physical symptoms such as dry eyes, migraine headaches, backaches, eating irregularities (skipping meals), neglecting personal hygiene, etc.? These can be signs of too much time spent at the computer.

Where do you start if you think your child has a problem? While these are all possible indicators of an Internet addiction, in the end, the best way to know if your child has developed an addiction is to engage in open and honest communication. As one expert writes, "*A warm and communicative parent-child relationship is the most important nontechnical means that parents can use to deal with the challenges of the sexualized media environment*" (Patricia M. Greenfield, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*).

Be practical about avoiding Internet addiction. Keep the lines of communication open about the expectation of Internet use. Set guidelines early and stick to them. Place the computer in a more central and open location so you can more easily monitor how it is used. Teach responsible online behavior: show your children the great benefits of the Internet, but most importantly, show them how to balance their time—online and off-line.